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BUCK TAYLOR IN THE LEAD, THE GALLANT COWBOY BAND WENT AT A GALLOP OVER THE PRAIRIES, STRAIGHT TOWARD OLD MISSION HILL.

OR, The Red Riders of the Rio Grande.

A Romance of Life among the
Rangers and the Raiders of
the Southwest Border.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I. DEVIL DICK.

He was a man with a record, was Richard Drummond, wanderer, gambler, Texan Ranger, scout, and with a curtain of mystery hanging over his past life which no one had been able to see beyond.

A small wagon-train, camped in a Texan settlement, had been witness to a four-handed duel in which one man had fought and killed three foes who had attacked him.

A dashing, handsome fellow, a superb horseman, armed to the teeth and dressed like a frontier dandy, the stranger had won the admiration of the people of the train.

They had been told by their guide, Lasso Luke, that the handsome stranger was a desperado, a Texan gambler, known as Devil Dick Drummond, and properly named.

Two days after this same deadly duelist had overtaken the train, rescued it from a band of Indians, into whose power the treachery of Lasso Luke the guide had led it, and himself acting as guide, he had led it on to its destination.

Among the people of the train was a Mr. Redmond, his wife and their niece, known as their adopted daughter.

Ruth Redmond was the daughter of Mr. Redmond's brother, an army officer who had lost his life upon the prairies, as had his wife, at the hands of the Comanches.

Ruth had been born and reared upon the prairies until her fifteenth year, when she went to dwell with her uncle and aunt in Alabama.

But adversity drove Mr. Redmond to seek the ranch of Ruth, left her by her father, and it was upon their way there that Devil Dick crossed their path.

He proved himself a daring man, true friend, and saved them more than twice from death, and Ruth Redmond, then in her eighteenth year, beautiful, and a dashing, splendid girl, who loved manly courage, fell desperately in love with the strange man who thus crossed her path.

The ranch was reached, and Mr. Redmond, his wife and Ruth settled down there in comfort.

But thither came Richard Drummond, and be the man what he might, he won and wedded Ruth Redmond.

He bore her away to the mines of New Mexico, where he knew that her father held an interest which would give her a large fortune.

Was it the love of gold that caused Dick Drummond to win the heart of Ruth Redmond?

The sequel will show.

CHAPTER II. THE SOLDIERS' MINE.

"I SAY, pard, I may be a rough one, and on the shoot and kill, lookin' out fer number one every time, but you kin bet I hain't no man ter steal a dollar that don't come to me squar', and never could I take the bread out o' the mouth o' a leetle girl.

"It are my honesty that hev caused me ter cerkilate around that I wants ter find Captain Redmond's darter, and I has let it be knowed rather general that I has news ter interest her with a yaller metal ring to it."

The speaker was seated before his cabin in a mining-camp of New Mexico.

He was a large man, with long black hair and beard, tinged with gray, and had the unmistakable stamp of the Hebrew upon his face.

He had been a miner for a score of years, drifting from place to place, never giving up, always hopeful, until at last the gold had come his way.

A fearless fellow, he had been able to fight his way, and honest ever, he had been chosen by Captain Redmond years before to work his mine with him on shares.

He was known as "Marks the Miner," but soon after was called "The Jew Miner."

The mine had never paid during Captain Redmond's lifetime, and he had never supposed that it would, so had left no mention of it in his will, leaving his daughter Ruth a fine ranch, some cattle and horses, and to the guardianship of his brother.

The lead was known as the "Soldiers' Mine," from the fact that half a dozen army officers had put money into it, and Captain Redmond had bought them out.

But Marks had "struck it rich" in time, and had advertised the fact so that it would reach Captain Redmond's heir.

It had come to the ears of Lasso Luke the guide of the Redmond train, and he had sought to win the heiress, and failing had led the train into a trap to get her into his power.

It had reached the ears of Devil Dick, and he had won the heiress and wedded her.

And so Marks sat in front of his cabin that evening, and dilated upon what he had done to find the heiress.

"It will be a han'some fortin' fer her, won't it, Marks?" asked a pard.

"Yer bet it will, Granger.

"I has banked for myself over a clean hundred thousand, and her share were two-thirds, see?"

"Well, I has a letter here from the gent as is

ter marry her, and he says they will come this way ter see me when they gits spliced.

"This were weeks ago, and I is a-lookin' fer 'em on any coach.

"I only hopes she has married ther right sort o' a feller."

"Gals with money seldom does, Marks; but who be he, a army officer?"

"No, he signs his name only Richard Drummond, and I once knew a gambler by that name that came through the mines and cleaned out the boys.

"He were a dandy ter look at, cool as ice, and on ther shoot for all it was worth.

"Thar sounds the stage-horn now."

A few minutes after, the stage-coach rolled up to what was known as the "Gold Brick Hotel," and out sprung a tall, fine-looking man, dressed in a velvet jacket, corduroy pants stuck in top-boots, a black sombrero, and with a belt of arms strapped about his waist.

He aided to alight a young girl with a darkly-bronzed but beautiful face, great lustrous black eyes, and a smile of wonderful fascination.

She was plainly, but neatly dressed in a dark-gray habit, wore a sombrero, gold-embroidered, and over her shoulders was thrown an officer's military cloak.

"Them is my people," cried Marks the Miner, and pressing forward he introduced himself in his characteristic way.

They were "his people," for it was Richard Drummond and his wife, the latter having learned of her inheritance just on the eve of her marriage.

"Yer see, miss, I have banked for you a little over two hundred thousand, you having two-third ownership, I one-third."

"I has mine safe, too, and as the mine is not yet played out, I'll keep a-pegging away at it as long as she pans out dust for us, and then I intends ter retire and live on my money, whar I kin enjoy life, arter the hard knocks I has know'd."

Such was Marks the Miner's statement to Ruth, and he turned over to her husband, at her request, the fortune his honesty had saved for her.

And then the evil in the nature of Devil Dick asserted itself, for he began to squander his wife's fortune, and in a few years she had been driven to seek a refuge in her girlhood home in the Texas Ranch, with her uncle and aunt, and to know that her wicked husband was a fugitive in Mexico, whence to escape punishment for his crimes he had been forced to find a hiding place.

CHAPTER III.

THE LAST OF HER RACE.

A SMALL cavalcade was winding across the prairie just at sunset, some five years after Ruth Redmond had become the wife of Devil Dick Drummond.

It had filed out of a prairie home, situated in some timber upon the banks of a stream, and was wending its way across the prairie toward a hill that was heavily wooded, and rose from the surrounding plain alone, for no other rise was near.

The cavalcade consisted of a "jumper," or prairie wagon, on which was visible a pine coffin painted black.

A negro man drove the wagon, and by his side was seated a negress, and her eyes were red from weeping.

Just behind the wagon, which was serving as a hearse, rode a woman.

It was Ruth Redmond, as she again called herself, for since her return to her home she had utterly discarded the name of her evil husband.

Not a day older did she look, in spite of the years and the sorrows she had known.

Her form was faultless, and clad in a black riding-habit, while upon her head she wore a sombrero of the same somber hue.

A gold cord encircled it, and the brim was looped up with a gold Texas star.

Her face wore a sad expression, one mingled with bitterness, as though the world had dealt her some severe blows.

Behind her came a dozen horsemen of the unmistakable type of Texan cowboys.

They were frank-faced, daring fellows, but now there rested a look of gloom in every countenance as they rode along two by two.

The party drew near the distant hill, and as they did so it was seen that the spot in the long ago had been a Catholic Mission of the early Spanish settlers in Mexico, of which Texas was then a part.

There was a ruin of a stone chapel and out-buildings, but all crumbling to decay, for many

a long year had passed since the worthy pair and their flocks had dwelt there.

A large stone cross was where the trail wound from the prairie up the hill, and there was a fine spring of limpid water, about its edges being thousands of tracks of buffalo, deer, wolves and wild horses, for it was a favorite drinking-place with animals.

Up the hill wound the vehicle with its dead, filing around the ruined chapel, and finding a halting place in an ancient burying-ground.

There were a few newly made graves among the old ones, for the rancheros came from far and wide to the sacred, deserted spot to bury their beloved dead there.

Apart from the others was a grave newly made, and above it was a head-board into which had been skillfully cut the name of the occupant. It read:

"TO THE MEMORY

OF

ROBERT REDMOND.

Born in Alabama, May 1st, 18—.

Slain by Comanches in Texas, Oct. 2d, 18—."

It was the grave of Ruth Redmond's uncle, and adopted father.

A few months before the Comanches had raided the ranch, and left death and destruction behind them.

Mrs. Redmond had never rallied from the shock, and fading away day by day, she was now being borne to the grave, a resting-place by side of her buried husband.

Afar back over the prairie was the home of Sunset Ranch, a pleasant home withal, with many comforts about it for that wild land.

And there now was Ruth Redmond to return alone, the last of her race.

She had all about her to make life enjoyable, except companionship and kindred.

The man who had made her his wife, squandered her fortune and wrecked her life, was a fugitive in Mexico.

Her parents had fallen by the hands of the Comanches, then followed her uncle, and now her loved aunt was to be placed in the grave.

It was no wonder that Ruth Redmond's thoughts were bitter as she followed the body to the grave.

The faithful negroes, Primus and Nannie still clung to her, and upon the ranch were the cattle-herders, a dozen gallant cowboys, and to her the rest of the world now was a blank.

The little party halted near Robert Redmond's burying-place, and the cowboys, taking spades and shovels from the wagon, set to work to dig a grave for his wife.

They worked steadily and in silence, while Ruth Redmond strolled about the hill alone and gathered wild flowers to place upon the grave.

At last the grave was ready, the coffin was lowered with lariats, the burial service was recited in a low, but firm voice by Ruth Redmond, and then the earth fell with a hollow sound upon the coffin.

At last the mound was completed, the wild-flowers were strewn upon it, and she who was the last of her race, a young and beautiful woman, alone, as it were, in that wild land, said:

"My friends, one and all, I thank you!"

Hardly had the words been spoken when a cry of warning broke from the lips of a cowboy, and all eyes glancing out upon the prairie saw that a large band of Comanches were between them and the ranch.

CHAPTER IV.

IN CLOSE QUARTERS.

ONE would naturally suppose, that, when danger threatened, the party at the old burying-ground would have trusted to one of the cowboys as their leader; but, instead, all eyes turned upon Ruth Redmond for aid and instructions.

She was a soldier's daughter, and had seen much of border life. Her uncle had turned to her often for her advice, and she was known by the cowboys to be fearless, skillful and cool.

She at once, when the alarm was given, walked over to the edge of the timber where the horses had been left, and took a view of the danger.

There lay the ranch with its white walls and fences six miles away across the prairie, situated upon the banks of the winding stream.

Afar below was a large herd of cattle and a couple of hundred ponies, guarded by two cowboys only, for the rest were with the funeral party.

Those two cowboy guards were striving to drive the herds toward the stream, to cross and escape with them from the threatened danger.

Then, a mile only from the Mission Hill, were the Comanches, some three-score in number.

They had followed a belt of timber stretching away from the range of hills many miles away.

And they had been unseen by the cowboys about the grave, in the two hours they had been there digging the grave and filling it in.

But the keen eyes of the Comanches had noted the horses in the timber on the hill, and they had flanked them, to cut them off from the ranch to which they knew they must belong.

Such was the situation that Ruth Redmond looked upon.

Her face did not pale, nor did she lose her nerve in the slightest degree.

She had with her the two negroes and ten cowboys, counting Primus, just eleven men, to fight off six to one.

But then Ruth Redmond counted herself as equal to a man, for she was the best shot of the lot, she well knew, and she had been in many scenes of danger before, and had not flinched from death.

"We are caught fairly, boys," she said, in her calm way, as she turned her glass upon the Indians.

"They have followed the timber belt around from the hills, and are between us and home, and strong enough to hold us here with part of their force while the remainder plunder and burn the ranch.

"Fortunately, they do not know our number."

The thought of desolation falling upon her home, and perhaps death to herself and her companions, did not unnerve her in the slightest degree, and Bible Bill, the chief of the cowboys, said admiringly:

"You are a dandy, Captain Ruth, if you do wear petticoats; but, with the aid of Heaven we'll lick those red-skins like the very devil, if they make a break on us here."

"Bible Bill" was a "dandy" himself. He had been a very hard citizen in his earlier life, but had been corralled by an itinerant person who had converted him, since which time he had carried his Bible with him as religiously as he did his revolvers.

He always said his prayers upon retiring, never swore, and on Sundays, when he could get an audience of his comrades, he would preach to them.

If they preferred their game of cards to his preaching, he was just obliging enough to chip in the game and win all they had at stake, and half of his winnings would go to charity, while the other half he sent off to educate a young sister who was at school at Galveston.

Bible Bill was a tall, sinewy fellow of thirty, full of pluck, a perfect type of a cowboy, and had a heart as big as an ox.

He was a desperate fighter, and when firing upon a foe would say: "The Lord have mercy upon your poor soul, darn yer!"

A handsome fellow he was, very entertaining, and he had a voice of sweetest melody, so that the boys were wont to say to him:

"Let up on prayer and preaching, Bible Bill, and sing us a pious tune."

Ruth Redmond smiled at Bill Darling's remark that with the help of Heaven they would give the red-skins the devil, and said:

"Well, Bible Bill, we must do our best."

"But see there!"

"That is what they are waiting for."

She pointed toward the end of the belt of timber as she spoke, a mile or more from where the red-skins were grouped together, quietly waiting, and the faces of the cowboys changed color as they beheld a second band of Comanches coming into view.

In silence all counted them, as they came in single file from the timber, and Ruth said aloud:

"Thirty-seven!"

"Yes, and with those waiting for them, Captain Ruth, they number a hundred, while we are—"

He paused as he glanced over the little group, but Ruth said:

"We are thirteen, an unlucky number."

"But we are all well mounted, our horses are fresh, and we can retreat with a start of over a mile, and reach some of the ranches."

"And leave Sunset Ranch to be destroyed, Captain Ruth?"

"It must be so, Bible Bill, for to fight ten to one would be madness."

CHAPTER V.

THE CHAPEL FORT.

THE situation was a serious one.

The Comanches were on a raid, that was certain, and the two bands could readily hold the

cowboys in check, and raid Sunset Ranch, and other places as well.

Of course there was a chance to dash away and escape, reaching other ranches and giving the alarm.

But just how sure this was could not be told, for the negroes would have to go in the ambulance, as Nannie was too fat to ride horseback, and the Indians, if their horses were fresh, could perhaps overtake them.

Such was the situation, and it looked gloomy.

Ruth Redmond did not, however, show any anxiety, but said:

"Bible Bill, our first duty is to send two of our best mounted men to warn the ranches, though it cuts down our own force, and as we could not make much of a flight with the ambulance, we had better go into the ruined chapel yonder and stand at bay."

"We have no food, it is true; but we can fill our canteens with water at the spring, and the two boys can arouse the people, and relieve us to-morrow some time."

"What do you say?"

"You talk right to the point, Captain Ruth, and no mistake."

"We will have the advantage of fighting in the Lord's sanctuary, and heathens should beware not to crowd us there."

"I'll send Jack Scott and Reuben Rand to give the alarm, for they are mounted better than any one else, as well as being lightweights."

"Pards, you get up and dust: you striking for Tom Harris's ranch, Jack, and Reuben, you make for Mabrey's Ranch, and don't halt until you get there."

"Rouse the whole hive and crowd this way with Heaven's help and all the fighters you can get, for we'll need your aid badly and Providence won't help us after our ammunition is gone, and there are no ravens to feed us in this wilderness, nor locusts and wild honey to give us if the birds had the inclination."

"Light out, pard, and the Lord be with you."

The two men designated sprung upon their horses and rode down the trail together, Bible Bill following with all the canteens, while Ruth Redmond led the rest of the party to the old unused chapel and began to prepare to fight it out there.

The horses were led into a safe retreat, stones were piled into position, and branches were cut to hide the interior as much as possible.

In the meanwhile Bible Bill and the two cowboy couriers had reached the spring before spoken of.

The couriers took a long drink, watered their horses, mounted and were off like arrows from a bow, one going to the north, the other westward.

Bible Bill filled the canteens and then rode to a point where he could command a full view of the prairies.

He saw his couriers riding for their lives, for from the first seen band of red-skins, half a dozen warriors had started in full chase, one after each cowboy.

But Bible Bill saw something else that caused him to give a startled cry.

"What is it, Bible Bill?" asked Ruth, riding toward him, for she had left the chapel as she saw him take up his position of observation to join him.

"This is to be a grand raid, Captain Ruth, for see yonder!"

He pointed off beyond the hill where were visible a party of thirty or forty Indians coming toward the hill from the opposite direction that the others had appeared in.

"Yes, there are three bands of them, Bible Bill, and this is doubtless their rendezvous."

"See, three warriors from the last band have gone off in chase of Reuben Rand."

"Yes, but they will never catch Reuben or Jack, mounted as they are."

"I wish you had gone as a courier, Captain Ruth."

"You mean by that we here are in great danger?"

"It looks that way, for now there are all told but nine men to fight nearly a hundred and fifty Indians."

"Well, the chapel is a strong position, and we are all well armed, and Nannie can load a rifle if she cannot fire one."

"Ah! they are moving upon us and from three points, so we must hunt cover, Bible Bill, and be ready for them."

"Yes, we must not let them down us, Captain Ruth, for we are soldiers of the Lord, and the Comanches are natural born children of the devil."

As he spoke Bible Bill led the way back to the chapel, and he was glad to see the people at work, and that under the directions of Ruth they were making the position a very strong one.

The horses had been gotten out of range, and old Nannie was also in a safe position, while the windows and door of the chapel had been well blocked up with heavy stones.

The wagon had been hauled in also, and after Bible Bill and Ruth had ridden into the ruin, the doorway was blocked behind them.

Fortunately the space around the chapel for a couple of hundred feet was open, affording no shelter to the red-skins, and the ruin was so small, with only half a dozen windows and two doors in it, that these could be defended readily, as all but one opening upon each side had been blocked up, leaving four points of defense.

Hardly had all gotten into position, when with wild yells, from three sides, the Comanches came at a rush up the hillside toward the chapel.

CHAPTER VI.

THE COMANCHE RUSH.

"To your posts, boys!"

The order was given by Ruth with a coolness that won the admiration of the cowboys, while old Nannie called out:

"Yis, honey, let dem git to dere postes, while you comes and hides down here wid me, for you is too pretty ter be kilt."

But Ruth stood by one of the windows, with her repeating-rifle in hand, and Primus and a cowboy were with her.

Bible Bill was at the most exposed position with two others, and the other positions were guarded by the rest of the little band.

The three separate bands of Indians charged in column up the hill, and this enabled each window to have the benefit of the aid of those who were to have guarded the rear, at least for the first fire.

The way that the Comanches came on showed that they intended to wipe out the little party in the ruin, then dash all together upon Sunset Ranch, and follow it with a rush along the line of settlements.

They had seen the two couriers start for aid, and knew that their raiding expedition would soon be known and the whole country aroused.

So up the hill they charged in three columns, and the fair captain, for she was so acknowledged to be, said in her calm, fearless way:

"Boys, we must check them, so don't throw shots away."

"Ready, fire!"

Ten rifles flashed together, and as all were repeating-rifles, the shots rattled rapidly and with terrible effect.

The result was that the Comanches wheeled their ponies, and rode quickly back over the edge of the hill for shelter.

They were hard hit, amazed and demoralized by the well-aimed fire, for they had expected to find not over half a dozen people there, and the repeating-rifles completely deceived them, for they believed that they were rushing upon a large force.

So they staggered back to cover, while the cowboys yelled with triumph and defiance.

There before their eyes the defenders saw their deadly work, for a dozen red-skins had fallen, and as many ponies lay in full sight.

The three bands fell back out of range, firing a few shots from a musket here and there in possession of a warrior, and with their bows sending showers of arrows into the old ruin.

Once they had retreated, the best braves were dismounted and thrown forward to reach spots from whence they could pick off the defenders, while the chief called about him the other leaders of the band for a pow-wow.

He was a man of striking appearance, carried himself with an upright, soldierly bearing, and was mounted upon a superb horse, richly fitted out with savage finery.

The chief had slung at his back a repeating rifle, and in his buckskin belt wore a pair of revolvers.

There was something about him, even beneath the dark red stain upon his face, and the hideous war-paint, that betokened the white man.

His hair was worn long, and was black; but he had it braided so with silk strings and feathers, as to almost hide its color.

He rode too a Mexican saddle, which like the massive bridle was heavily studded with silver, while his spurs were of solid metal, and he wore top-boots, where his braves were moccined.

His war-bonnet was a most gorgeous affair of red, black and white feathers, and fell below his saddle-skirts when he was mounted.

He had led the charge of the largest column, the one first seen out upon the prairie, and had been unharmed by the hot fire of the little party at bay.

His horse was a clay-bank stallion, with snow-white mane and tail and he too had escaped as had his master.

Beaten back by the hot fire the chief rallied his leading warriors to hold a talk over what was best to be done.

The open space between the timber on the ridge of the hill on two sides, and the other ruins in the rear, was swept by the fire of the party at bay, and the warriors knew that it would be death to attempt to charge across it.

It was now a couple of hours before night-fall. To wait until darkness aided them would be to lose most valuable time and give the people from the ranches a chance to rally; so it was decided by the red raiders to make another charge, and on foot, from one point, driving the ponies before them as a breastwork.

This would enable the warriors to get close enough, before their living shelter was brought down, to dash on the rest of the distance and get into the chapel with a rush, and thus end the struggle.

Having thus decided, the worst of the ponies were picked out, their bits were tied together, fifteen abreast, but so lightly that when one fell the others could readily break loose and push on.

There were three rows of these ponies, and behind them came the braves, bows and arrows in hand and scalping-knives ready.

Then the platoons of animals were set in motion. Over the top of the ridge they appeared, lashed into a full run by the warriors, who followed close upon their heels, while the braves, sheltered in the timber and among the rocks, sent showers of arrows into the mine.

"Now it is beat them back, boys, or die!" cried Ruth Redmond, and her repeating rifle opened the fight!

CHAPTER VII.

BUCK TAYLOR'S BOYS.

"SAY, pards, do you believe in dreams?"

The speaker was a youth, towering several inches above the ordinary height of men, broad-shouldered, straight as an arrow, with a beardless face, and hair of a light-brown hue.

He was dressed as a Texas cowboy, with an air of neatness in his make-up and desire to look well.

His light-gray sombrero was silver-embroidered, and the rim was pinned up on the left side with a gold star.

The scene was a camp of cowboys near an army post, and the men were in Government service as herdsmen.

There were some forty in the camp, and if there was a man of twenty-five in the outfit, he did not look it.

In spite of his size, the one who asked the question that opens this chapter, was the youngest one of the band, and he was the chief, or "captain."

To the soldiers and ranch people the band was known as Buck Taylor's Boys, and they had won a reputation as a most daring lot of horsemen, and the best fighters on the Texas Plains.

Every man among them was a competent guide, and all of them were scouts of skill and courage which made them able allies of the army.

Wild riders, typical cowboys they were, too, caring well for their cattle and protecting them from red-skins and raiders alike.

Thousands of cattle were under their charge, and they had hundreds of horses also to look after.

They would go on a range, where grass and water were plentiful, and perhaps make a circuit with their herd in a season of several hundred miles.

When cattle or horses were needed at the posts, a courier would be sent to Buck Taylor with orders to send in the required number, and the best of the herd would be picked and sent in under half a dozen of the band.

The camp of Buck Taylor's Boys, at the time they are presented to the reader, was some sixty miles from the Sunset Ranch owned by Ruth Redmond.

It was a pleasant camp, for they had been resting there some two weeks, and they made themselves comfortable and lived on the best in their wild life of danger.

"I does believe in dreams, Cap'n Buck, for I has know'd 'em ter come true," answered one of the men, who was lying upon his blanket in the camp, watching a couple of his comrades cook breakfast, for it was just after dawn, and the

band was just waking up, those whose duty it was to go on post as guard, getting ready to ride out and relieve their comrades who had stood the night through.

Buck Taylor had just made his toilet, by a jump in the river, upon the bank of which their camp was located, and refreshed by his bath, he was combing out his long locks when he went up to the group and asked the question:

"Say, pards, do you believe in dreams?"

"I believe in 'em."

"Me too."

"So does I."

"You bet I don't go ag'in' 'em."

"Dreams is warnings no man should go against!"

Such were the answers to the question, and then came the words:

"Well, Buck, what has you been dreamin'?"

"I'll tell you, pards, and it impresses me so I feel like taking all but a cattle-guard, and going to see if it is true."

"What is it, Buck?"

"Well, you know I have a firm friend in Bible Bill, who is chief cowboy on Sunset Ranch?"

"Yes."

"We have not met for a year now, and we were once firm pards."

"But we both fell in love with the same little Mexican girl at a fandango down in San Antone, and Bible Bill took it to heart so that we drifted apart."

"Now, last night I dreamed that I saw Bible Bill and a young girl corralled by Indians, and I distinctly heard his words:

"You can save us, Buck! Come to me! come to me!"

"It's a warning for you to go, Buck."

"So says I."

"I'm with yer, Cap'n Buck."

"Order out the Boys, Buck, and take the trail."

"Don't slight the cry, pard!"

"Listen to the call of your old pard, Buck!"

Such were the cries of the men, and Buck Taylor seemed pleased to feel that his words had met with such a hearty response.

"I thank you, pards, and I will obey the call."

"You see I jumped in the river for a plunge, hoping the dream would be worked out of my mind."

"But it stuck there, and now I am ready to say heed it."

A cheer answered his words, and he continued:

"I will take thirty men, and the other ten can head the herds toward the fort by slow marches."

"It is sixty miles from here to Sunset Ranch, and I will strike for that point, as if the Comanches have made a dash in there, they will find half a hundred rich ranches to plunder and plenty of scalps."

"There are people enough to beat them back if they knew of their coming; but if surprised, then the red-skins would have their own way."

"So, boys, just put in three days' food in your haversacks, mount your best horses, and we'll be off in an hour's time to trail that dream down," and a wild cheer greeted the words of the young Cowboy Captain.

CHAPTER VIII.

TRAILING A DREAM.

THIRTY-ONE splendidly mounted, thoroughly armed young men rode out of the camp of Buck Taylor's Cowboys, bound upon the trail of a dream.

Five led horses were taken along, carrying extra weight in provisions, ammunition, and camp outfit, and they would come in well should any animal break down, or get wounded.

Buck Taylor headed his men, who almost invariably rode on a trail in Indian file.

He led them by a flank movement on Sunset Ranch, to approach it from the range of hills, and thus he knew that they would cross any Indian trail that had gone toward the settlements, and get at an idea of the force they would have to meet.

If there was any one of the young horsemen who doubted that they would find the dream true, he did not declare himself.

Men who dwell in the solitude of the prairies and mountains are just as superstitious as those who sail the seas, and no reasoning can argue them out of it.

That Buck's dream would show that the Comanches were on the war-path they were firmly convinced, and when, toward sunset, they came upon a trail leading down from the range and stretching away across the prairies toward

the settlements, there were a number of mental "I-told-you-so's."

But the cowboys soon got at the force that had gone that way, and Buck said:

"About a hundred and fifty, I take it, boys; but they won't keep together, but divide, and we don't mind tackling any force, that is, three to one."

The derisive laughter of his men, at the thought that they should mind fighting three Indians to one, showed him that he need have no dread of the result.

So on they went, following the well-defined trail now, and going at a canter, for they knew that delays were dangerous.

Just at sunset, they came to where the trail divided into three.

Some sixty warriors had gone in one direction, obliquing to the left, forty more had held in the timber, and as many more had flanked to the right.

But Buck Taylor did not divide his force.

His experience told him that the three trails would meet again at a certain point in, or near the settlements.

They studied the trails thoroughly, and decided that they were made during the night.

They showed that the Indians had been moving leisurely, but the tracks going to the left and right gave evidence that those two parties had quickened their pace, and this was proof that they had a longer distance to go to reach a certain point on time with the center column.

"We will stick to the center trail, pards, and I'll guarantee that it follows this belt of timber along the stream," said Buck—which opinion was shared in by his comrades.

They camped just at nightfall; but, after an hour's rest and supper, they pressed on once more.

They were compelled to make frequent halts to discover, by a burning match, if they were still on the trail; and, when the dawn finally appeared, they had reached the end of the belt of timber they had been following.

As they came out on the open, afar across the prairie loomed up a dark mass, and upon it was the bright light of a fire.

"Pards, yonder is Old Mission Hill. That must have been the point where the red-skins were to meet; but why they have built a camp-fire I cannot understand— Ha! hear that!"

The sound of a shot came across the prairie; then another and another, until they rung out rapidly.

"Into your saddles, pards. You are needed yonder!" and Buck Taylor in the lead, the gallant cowboy band went at a gallop over the prairies, straight toward Old Mission Hill.

As they neared the hill, rising like a giant sentinel above the plain, they discovered that the firelight illuminated the walls of the old ruined chapel, and that there appeared to be a fire built on each side of the ruin.

Then from the dark recesses of the surrounding timber came the unmistakable war-cries of the Comanches!

Now and then a band of a dozen warriors would dash into sight, but they would retreat under the withering fire poured upon them from the defenders of the ruin.

"Pards, the Comanches have got a gallant band of whites corralled there, and if the whole force of red-skins are after them, we must not count odds," cried Buck Taylor, fire in his fine eyes."

"So say we all of us," answered a cowboy for his comrades.

"Now we must try and appear more than we are, so I will push on with twenty men, and you, Carl and Gordon, can go with four each to the right and left, and make row enough to appear to be many more."

"Come straight on to unite with us at the hill, for together we can stand off a couple of hundred red-skins."

"Take the led horses with you, Carl."

Thus, after a short halt the plan of attack had been arranged, the force was divided quickly, and straight toward the hill rode Buck Taylor and his squad, while the other two little bands circled to the left, to appear to be coming from the settlements to the rescue.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SURPRISE.

As he neared the hill with his men, noting that the party were holding out well in the ruin, Buck Taylor brought the pace down to a walk, formed his men in two lines of ten each, and approached the hill from the direction of the Indian advance, well aware that they would not be expecting a rescue from that direction.

They were in the deep shadow beyond the rays

of the firelight, and the brightness ahead of them illuminated their foes distinctly.

Up the hill they went, until the keen eyes of the young leader detected the ponies of the Comanches grouped not far ahead.

That they were guarded, Buck Taylor knew, but the Indian watchmen were busy just then, noting another plot to rush in upon the defenders of the ruin, and were not expecting a foe in their rear.

"Dash in and stampede the ponies, pards, and then make a rush for the riders, after we give them a volley."

"Use your rifles for the volley, and short guns at short range."

These were all the orders given, all that were needed, and as one man the rifles went up to the shoulders, the triggers were touched, and twenty-one bullets went into the band of red-skins upon the ridge.

Then the rifles were swung at their backs by the straps, and with a revolver in each hand and yells infernal, the cowboys charged upon the Indian ponies.

The stampede was complete, and the cowboys swept on to strike the astounded and frightened Indians, who were just preparing for their grand attack, which they knew must win.

It was an ingenious affair, for they had rigged up with their lariats a *movable fence*, which they could push before them as they advanced, and the logs of which would catch the bullets intended for them.

With such a breastwork of movable logs, the Comanches could reach near enough to the ruin to dash in with their main force and end the fight, for they had been kept at bay so long by the few defenders, that they feared help would arrive before they could make their swoop down upon the ranches.

And help had come, and all through Buck Taylor's dream that that his old pard Bible Bill was calling upon him for aid.

The first move of the Comanches was to rush for their stampeding ponies, and down the hill they went as the cowboys dashed over the ridge, their rattling revolvers bringing down warriors here and there.

And off upon the prairies came from two quarters the wild war-cries of Carl and Gordon's bands, and the Comanches felt that the ranchmen had also come to the rescue.

Who their first foes were they knew only too well, for the war-cry of Buck Taylor's Boys was well known to the whole Comanche tribe.

What their force was the Indians did not know, but they did know that they had come upon them from the trail they had followed from their own village, and cavalry might also be pursuing on hotly in the rear of the Herder Rangers.

Their ponies were stampeded, they had been thwarted in the very moment of their success, and cries from two directions out on the prairie showed that other pale-faces were coming to the rescue, while the little band at bay who had fought so bravely through half a day and the night, had now come out to fight on the aggressive.

It was very fortunate for the red-skins that Buck Taylor's small force held him back from a hot pursuit, for with half a hundred mounted men the Indians would have been cut to pieces.

As it was, they left a score of dead warriors upon the hill, and a number of badly wounded, whose resistance to the last caused them to be slain without mercy.

Some of the braves had managed to get their ponies, and these aided them in heading off others, so that when the dawn came the demoralized band of Comanches had reached the timber-belt and were pushing on in flight, many of their horses carrying double.

As the rear guard of warriors, among whom was the chief, glanced back over the prairie, they saw no large force of ranchmen hastening toward the hill.

All who had come to the rescue were on the hill, and as no pursuit was attempted, the chief gritted his teeth with rage to feel that they had been put to flight by a force too small to follow up their triumph.

But they dared not go back and fight it out, for help from the settlements could not be long delayed, and then fully one-third of their ponies and one-fourth of their warriors had fallen in the attack on the old chapel, on the rush of Buck Taylor's Boys.

So, doggedly they continued their retreat until afar off was visible a column of horsemen, and they knew that the ranchmen were hastening to the scene.

Then the Comanches quickened their pace, for with Buck Taylor's Boys reinforced by half a

hundred men from the settlements, they knew that they would be hard pressed in their retreat, and it was a long trail before them to the shelter of their hills.

And that they were wise in quickening their pace was soon shown as down from the hill upon their trail rode Buck Taylor and his men, while, leaving the old Mission upon their left, the other rescuers pressed on after the Cowboy Rangers.

CHAPTER X. THE RED TRAIL.

THE cowboys had kept up their pretended pursuit until only dead Indians remained upon the hill, and they were sure the whole band was in flight.

Light was at hand as they moved from the hill, and not wishing to expose their weakness, they returned to the timber.

Two of the brave band had fallen, under the Indian arrows, and half a dozen had received wounds, so that Buck Taylor's first duty was to them.

But, as he rode back to the old Mission ruin, now visible under the light of early dawn, he found there Carl and Gordon's squads, who had come in, and about them were gathered the brave party who had so long stood at bay.

"A woman among them?" said Buck Taylor as he drew near, and as his eyes fell upon the splendid form of Ruth Redmond, Bible Bill held his old pard and rushed toward him.

"Pard Buck, old fellow, you have saved us from death, and we are yours to command."

"We fought 'em off for all we were worth since yesterday afternoon, and fortunately found logs to burn and keep them in view during the night; but we had not another round of ammunition, and had you and your gallant boys not come when you did, our scalps would not be on our heads now."

"Bless you, Buck, my pard," and Bible Bill, with his left arm in a sling, from an arrow wound he had received, wrung the hand of his old-time friend, as he led him up to where Ruth Redmond and the brave heroes about her stood.

"Captain Ruth, this is my old pard Buck Taylor, of whom you have often heard as the Wild Rider of Texas, and we owe it to him that we are alive."

"Buck, this is Captain Ruth, as we call her, but Miss Redmond, the owner of Sunset Ranch, for she buried her last kin yesterday, and that's what brought us here where the Comanches corralled us."

Ruth Redmond turned her grand eyes upon the young prairie hero, and taking his hand said in her full, rich voice:

"I have heard much of you, Mr. Taylor, and am glad to meet you, while we do indeed owe you our lives as the end was at hand when you arrived."

"But how did you learn of our desperate position, may I ask?"

"You may laugh at me, Miss Redmond, but I learned it in a dream."

"In a dream?"

"Yes, and it seems I dreamed of your danger before it actually occurred, for it was night before last that I saw in my sleep Bible Bill and the face of a young girl—it seems to me now that it must have been your face—and I heard my old pard calling to me to come and save you."

"This is remarkable."

"It made an impression on me, Captain Ruth, that I could not shake off, and I told it to the boys, and they said we must start at once."

"But how did you know where to come?"

"I knew Bible Bill was chief of cowboys on Sunset Ranch, and so we made for this place, coming around by the range to see if the redskins had come down from the hills."

"We struck their trail, saw they were in large force and pushed on—What is it, Carl?"

"There is a large party of horsemen coming from toward the settlement."

"Good! then we can push those red-skins hard; but let us first see to our dead and wounded."

"Your wounded I shall claim, Mr. Taylor, for I have an ambulance here in which they, and my own wounded can be removed to my ranch, for I lost two men killed, and our wounded poor fellows."

"It was fortunate that it was no worse, miss," said Buck, and he at once called his men to get ready for the pursuit of the Comanches, while a courier was sent to head off the party coming to the rescue and have them cut straight across to the belt of timber and push on as rapidly as possible after the cowboys.

Four of Ruth Redmond's party, among them Bible Bill, joined Buck Taylor in the pursuit, so that the young cowboy captain had thirty men

with him, as those who had been but slightly wounded insisted upon going also.

The party of coming horsemen were seen to number all of half a hundred, and when joined by the courier all but three or four obliqued to the right to follow on after Buck Taylor, and they pressed on more rapidly as though anxious to make up for being late in arriving upon the scene.

As Buck Taylor entered the timber the other party were not half a mile behind him, and he urged on his horses in pursuit.

The Indians had seen their mistake in delaying, because not hotly pursued from the first, and now went as rapidly as they could.

But some of them were wounded, many were on foot, and their pursuers gained rapidly and by noon brought them to bay.

From there on it became a retreating fight, one that would have been utter destruction for the Comanches but for the worn-out condition of the horses of their pursuers.

But, as it was, they were driven until night-fall, and many a warrior was left to mark the deadly trail, while they were given a lesson they would long remember and dread.

And while the ranchmen parted with Buck Taylor and his Boys with cheers for their pluck and heroism, the latter took up the trail back to their posts of duty, their ranks thinned by the loss of half-a-dozen of their comrades, who had found graves along the red trail they had followed.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WOUNDED COWBOY.

RUTH REDMOND was one to act promptly, and when the cowboys had gone in pursuit of the Indians, along with the ranchmen the two couriers had brought to the rescue, she at once had graves dug for the dead, and the wounded cared for.

The latter were started in the ambulance for Sunset Ranch, Primus and Nannie accompanying them, and only too happy to be on their return home after all that they had passed through.

The slightly wounded rode off with the ambulance, as an escort, and those who were able remained behind to bury the dead.

The Indian braves who had fallen were also decently buried, but apart from the cowboys, and then, as noon had passed, Ruth Redmond mounted her horse and rode homeward, accompanied by her companions.

The face of the beautiful woman looked pale and haggard, after the terrible ordeal through which she had passed, and yet she was not one to spare herself in the least while she could serve others.

She realized fully that but for the coming of Buck Taylor and his daring followers, she would have been taken or killed, and all with her, and her home and many others swept away by the relentless savages.

The ranch was one of the best on the border, the building being commodious and comfortable, and Ruth at once had the place prepared for the wounded and the reception of others, for she expected others to be brought there, should the cowboys overtake the Comanches.

To do all in her power for them, she sent two of her cowboys with the ambulance to follow the trail, loading it with provisions and placing it at the disposal of the men severely wounded to bring them back.

It was the next morning when the ambulance came in sight, followed by the returning ranchmen.

The latter were jubilant over their victory, and cheered as they came along.

To many of them Ruth was known, and she received them all with the greatest hospitality, but was surprised to find that Buck Taylor had not returned, but had gone back to his post instead.

She had hoped to get another opportunity of thanking the brave cowboy leader for all he had done for her.

In the ambulance were two badly wounded men, whom the doctor, who had accompanied the ranchmen, said could not survive.

One was a cowboy from Sunset Ranch, and he said, faintly:

"I asked them to bring me back home to die, Captain Ruth, for I wanted to have you near me when I go out of life."

"I will not leave you, Kendrick; but I hope it is not so bad as you think," said Ruth, and she turned to the other wounded man.

He, too, was a cowboy, one from the ranch of Thomas Harris, and he, too, had begged to be taken in the ambulance with his dying comrade.

"Do you think I'll die, miss?" he asked most anxiously, as Ruth stepped to his side.

"The doctor says you have a very serious wound," she answered evasively.

"But what do you think, miss?"

"Well, I always believe in hoping for the best."

"I see that you believe I am downed; but I don't give up yet, and I wish you to ask the doctor just what he thinks of my case."

"I will."

"Have him come here now, and examine my wound again, and ask him just what he thinks."

"Do you wish to know the truth?"

"I do."

"Then I will ask him."

The doctor was sent for, and at the request of Ruth, gave the wounded man a critical examination.

"Well, doctor?" asked the man, as his face grew whiter.

"I am sorry to say that you must die."

"How long can I last?"

"Perhaps through the night, and maybe you may go in a couple of hours."

"You are sure?"

"Perfectly, though it pains me to tell you so, my brave fellow."

"There is nothing that can be done to save me?"

"No power could save you now, my friend."

The man's face deepened in pallor and gloom, and he closed his eyes as though in sleep.

But Ruth Redmond saw two tears creep out from beneath the lids, and laying her hand gently upon his forehead, she said in a low, tender voice:

"Is there anything I can do for you, my poor friend?"

The eyes opened, and meeting hers, the man shuddered.

But he said quickly and firmly:

"Yes; have them move this cot to where I will be alone, where I can say something to you, that others must not hear."

"If you wish it, I will have you moved."

"I do wish it, and lose no time, for it seems to me I can already feel the shadows creeping over me."

The rude cot was raised by the men whom Ruth called, and the wounded cowboy was borne into another room, the sitting-room of the house.

"No one can hear what I have to say to you now?" he asked anxiously.

"No, but unless you wish, do not tell me anything you might regret, should you recover."

"I cannot recover. I feel now that I am dying, and I wish to make you my confessor, for you are most deeply interested in what I have to say."

"Get pen, ink and paper, and write down what I say to you."

In silence Ruth Redmond obeyed the command of the dying cowboy.

CHAPTER XII.

THE COWBOY'S CONFESSION.

"No one can hear?" asked the dying cowboy, and the same anxious look passed over his face which Ruth Redmond had seen there when he asked if it was a certainty that he would die.

"No one is near."

"And you are sure I cannot live?"

"You heard the doctor's report."

"You see, miss, I know that if I was dying and the boys heard what I have to tell you, they'd take me out and hang me."

"Is it so bad as that?"

"It is worse."

"Worse?"

"You see I'd deserve it."

"Ah! but you wish to ease your conscience now by telling of some sin you have been guilty of?"

"That is partly it, miss, and partly to help you."

"To help me?"

"Yes, miss."

"How can you do that?"

"Well, miss, I'll tell you what I have to say, for I seem to be growing weaker fast."

"But you'll keep my secret?"

"I will faithfully do so."

"You know who I am, do you not?"

"I remember that you came here some six weeks ago and remained with my cowboys all night, and they knew you."

"My name is Ralph Ross, miss, but the boys call me Roper Ross, because I handle a lariat so well."

"Yes."

"I am a cowboy on Thomas Harris's ranch,

and they don't know that I am living a double life."

"A double life?"

"Yes, miss, for I had as a boyhood friend a man who got me into all kinds of deviltry, and I had to at last run away to keep out of prison, perhaps worse, while he remained at home and no one suspected him of being guilty with me, in fact the one who started me upon the evil life I led."

"Then he married the girl I loved with all my soul, and who I believe loved me."

"She had money and he squandered it, and deserted her then, for he too had gotten into trouble that forced him to leave."

"He turned up in Texas as a gambler, and became a man to be feared by all, for he was a skillful card-sharp, and a dead shot as well, while he certainly had wonderful pluck."

"He ranged through the camps alone, and became a skillful scout, and one day he shot a man in a quarrel, who asked him to do an act of justice for him."

"He was in search of the heiress of a certain mine in New Mexico, and had been sent out by one who was part owner with her, to find her."

"The man promised to do so, and an ill wind blew her his way, for she was then coming to Texas to settle."

"He saved the wagon train from massacre, and—"

"See here, Ralph Ross, you are telling of scenes in my own life," said Ruth Redmond, hoarsely.

"Yes, that is why I am telling you, that you may know all."

"I will listen to all you have to say, but I do not believe anything you can tell can deal me a more cruel blow than what I have had to suffer."

"I will tell you the truth, so that, as you have suffered in the past, you can protect yourself in the future."

"In the future?"

"Yes."

"From whom?"

"From the man whom you married, and who then deserted you, after he had squandered your money."

"He is dead."

"He is not dead."

"My God! do you know this?"

"I do."

"Tell me all that you know," she said, eagerly.

"He deserted you as he did his first wife—"

"One moment!"

"Yes, miss."

"Is that poor girl alive?" and Ruth Redmond's eyes blazed as she asked the question, and her voice quivered.

"Yes, or she was half a year ago."

"Her name?"

"She is known by her maiden name now—it was Ella Glenn!"

"Her home?"

"Is in G—, Pennsylvania."

Ruth Redmond wrote the name and address down, and then said, sternly:

"I am ready to hear all you can tell now."

Her face was deathly white, and her mouth wore a look of stern resolve.

"I am sorry to give you pain, miss, but it is to protect you in the future."

"You say that he is not dead?"

"No, he made the acquaintance of a young Mexican gentleman, going to college in the States, saved his life and accompanied him to Mexico."

"The Mexican lived with his father and sister, and both warmly welcomed the stranger."

"Well, the stranger won at cards large sums from the father and son, and tried to force the girl to become his wife."

"Trouble followed and he killed the young Mexican in a duel and was forced to fly for his life."

"He became a leader of Mexican outlaws, and kidnapped the Mexican girl, who was rescued by an officer of the United States Army, who afterward married her, and they now dwell far to the northward of here on their ranch, having one child, a daughter."

"Their name?"

"Hassan. He is known as Captain Ed Hassan the Ranchero of Soldier's Retreat Ranch."

"His wife was Senorita Marion Inglis and his daughter is Belle Hassan."

These names Ruth Redmond also wrote down, and then asked for the exact locality of the Hassan Ranch, and the dying man described its situation.

"And he is an outlaw, or leader of outlaws, you say, now in Mexico, this man who has led

such a life of crime?" said Ruth Redmond in a low tone.

"No, he was an outlaw leader for some time in Mexico, but the army drove him out and he is now in Texas."

"In Texas?" and Ruth Redmond sprung to her feet, her eyes blazing, her bosom heaving from the emotion that now seemed to overwhelm her.

CHAPTER XIII.

HER VOW.

"Do you mean that Richard Drummond, once my husband as I believed, is in Texas now?" asked Ruth, in a voice quivering with earnestness and passion commingled.

"Yes, miss, Devil Dick, as he is known to Texans, is now in Texas."

"After all he has done he has dared to come here, to the State in which I live?"

"He has."

"I can not believe it possible."

"As I said, miss, that whatever his life might be for evil, he is a brave man, and when he has an aim to accomplish he will take any risk."

"And what is his aim to accomplish now?"

"That is what I wish to confess to you, miss."

"Pray tell me all."

"You see I tried to live an honest life, after I came to Texas."

"I got a place with Ranchero Tom Harris, and I fell in love with his daughter, Bessie."

"She loved me too, for no one knew me as I had been, as I was forced to become under a spell of fear."

"And I don't want poor Bessie to believe me other than good and true, that I died like a brave man."

"She shall never know to the contrary, if you are indeed the bad man you claim to be."

"I am all I say I am, miss; but Bessie must never know."

"Bury me in some quiet spot, miss, and Bessie will come to my grave, I know, for she loves me."

"But now let me tell you how bad I am, and that I wish to save you."

"One night a man came to my cowboy cabin, and I gave him shelter."

"He appeared like an old man, for he had long gray hair and beard, and said he was a hunter."

"I gave him shelter and food, and as we sat talking together that night before the log fire, he suddenly called me by name and said that he had a surprise for me."

"Then he drew off his false beard and gray wig, and I recognized my boyhood friend, the one who had brought ruin upon my life, had stolen from me my bride that was to have been, poor Ella Glenn."

"It was Richard Drummond?"

"Yes, miss, Devil Dick."

"Well?"

"He told me then all about his wanderings and life, for he seemed to have no fear of me, and said that he had come to Texas to make a fortune."

"More, he told me that I must help him, and if I did, I should receive a handsome sum in gold."

"If I refused, he would make known the sins of my early life and see that the Texas Vigilantes swung me up."

"Of course you were in his power?"

"I was."

"And yielded?"

"I unfortunately did do so, and it has brought this misery upon me now."

"What was he then?"

"A renegade!"

"How do you mean?"

"He had allied himself to the Comanches."

"Ah! had turned against his own people?"

"Yes, miss, he had become chief, too, of the tribe, and had unlimited power over the redskins."

"He came then to see me to force me to aid him in plans of deviltry he had in view."

"Against his own race?"

"Yes, miss."

"What were they?"

"Well, he wished to have me play the part of a spy."

"And you refused?"

"Alas! I was forced to consent."

"You, too, played renegade?"

"I did what he commanded me to do."

"For fear of your life?"

"Yes, miss."

"In the first place he was to kidnap little Belle Hassan, the daughter of the Mexican lady who had refused to marry him."

"For the child he was to receive a large ransom, and his next blow was to be against the mother and the father."

"I understand."

"But first he was to make a raid upon your ranch."

"Mine?"

"Yes, miss, he was to capture you and force you to pay an enormous ransom, or rather your uncle for you, for your uncle and your aunt were living then."

"So he was to strike at me, his unfortunate victim again?" bitterly said the woman.

"He did strike at you, miss, for he was upon his way here to kidnap you, when he beheld you take refuge with your cowboys in the old chapel on Mission Hill."

"Yes, and that accounts for his persistent attack upon me."

"Yes, he was determined to have you at all odds."

"He showed this by keeping his whole force there to fight your defenders, when he could have sent off two bands to raid the settlements."

"Yes, and I wondered that he did not do so."

"He would not lose you."

"But he did."

"Yes, Buck Taylor sent him and his men flying."

I was with the same party coming from the settlements, and when we overtook Buck Taylor and his Boys they were doggedly driving the Comanches, and causing them to lose heavily.

"I saw the chief, for I readily picked him out, and he recognized me."

"When our force aided the cowboys of Buck Taylor in the attack, as we had brought the Comanches to bay, I saw Chief Ka-noon-ka—"

"What is the name he bears?"

"Ka-noon-ka. It means the Death Hand."

This did Ruth Redmond write down with the other notes she had taken.

"Whether he deemed that I was false to him, or only wished to get rid of one who knew him as he was, I do not know; but I saw him expose his life terribly, and it was for the purpose of killing me, for suddenly he raised his rifle, and, aiming full at me, fired."

"So it was Devil Dick, the renegade chief, who gave you your death-wound?"

"Yes, miss."

"Well, Ralph Ross, the secret that you have told me is safe in my keeping; but let me tell you that I have vowed to kill Richard Drummond, and now, before you, dying, I repeat that vow."

"I will avenge my wrongs, and I will avenge you, Roper Ralph."

"You have heard my vow?"

"I have," was the firm response of the dying cowboy.

CHAPTER XIV.

TO TRACK HIM DOWN.

RALPH ROSS the cowboy grew weaker and weaker, and just as the sun rose over the prairie and its rays crept through the window, falling upon his face, he said:

"Good-by, miss."

The words were faintly uttered, and were his last.

Ruth Redmond sat by his side, holding his hand, and she felt his grip relax and knew that he was dead.

But the ray of rosy sunlight resting upon his face seemed to indicate that life yet lingered, and she did not move until it passed away and the awful pallor of death crept over the features.

Then she arose and gave orders for the funeral, and sent a cowboy with a letter to Bessie Harris, who, as a girl of fourteen, had come with her parents to Texas with the same wagon-train that Ruth had.

The letter was as follows:

"SUNSET RANCH,
Thursday.

"MY DEAR BESSIE:—

"It is my painful duty to tell you that Roper Ralph—Ralph Ross—died to-day at sunrise, of a wound received in action with the Comanches, who you know made a raid down upon this part of the settlements."

"I promised Ralph I would let you know of his death, and permit me to say that I would be most happy to have you return with the messenger who bears this, and be present at the funeral, remaining as long as it is your pleasure to do so."

"Ralph will be buried to-morrow, for I shall give you ample time to reach here."

"You may have learned from the returning ranch-

men that my uncle and aunt are both dead, and that now I am alone in the world."

"My love to your parents and, hoping to see you soon."

"Affectionately your friend,

"RUTH REDMOND."

The other severely wounded man also died, and was buried over on the prairie where the cowboys had a little burying ground.

But Ralph Ross was to be taken to the Old Mission Hill and given a grave there.

It was after nightfall a couple of hours, when two horses with riders rode up to Sunset Ranch, and as Bessie Harris dismounted she was met by Ruth Redmond.

"Oh, Miss Ruth, it is terrible that he has gone!" cried Bessie Harris, who was a pretty, rosy-faced graceful girl of eighteen.

"Yes, he told me his secret, that you had promised to be his wife, and so I wanted you to come," and Ruth led her young guest to her room and did all in her power to cheer her, while never a hint did she give of the true life of the man whom she loved so devotedly.

"I told mother all about it when Ralph went off to fight the Comanches, for somehow I dreaded trouble."

"So they were glad to let me come and be with you."

"Ralph was not like the other men, Miss Ruth, for he was a gentleman, and well educated, and he was so good to me."

And thus the poor girl ran on, talking of her lover, and Ruth gave her all her sympathy in her sorrow.

Two cowboys from Sunset Ranch remained all night in lonely vigil with the body of the dead man, and the next morning another *cortege* filed away from the house across the prairie toward Old Mission Hill.

The ambulance was driven by a cowboy, for Primus had "played possum," saying he was ill, as he never intended to trust his valuable body so far from the ranch again.

As for his wife she would not have gone for her weight in gold.

"What's de use o' sperience ef yer don't profit by it," she said, recalling with sorrow her experience in the ruin when besieged by the Comanches.

The two girls, for Ruth seemed hardly older than Bessie, rode on horseback behind the ambulance bearing the coffin, and an escort of half a dozen cowboys followed.

Arriving at the hill the grave was dug, the cowboy's body was laid to rest, while Bible Bill slowly repeated the service and sang a hymn, in which Ruth joined in her rich melodious voice.

Then Bessie covered the grave with wild flowers, and with an aching heart mounted her horse and rode with Ruth back to the ranch.

For several weeks did Bessie Harris remain a guest at Sunset Ranch, and when she returned to her home Ruth accompanied her, and they had an escort of half a dozen cowboys.

A led horse carried Ruth's baggage, for she had decided upon making a trip to the north, for her vow must be kept, and she felt that her first duty was to stand face to face with the woman whom Roper Ralph said had been Richard Drummond's wife.

When she knew that this was true, then would Ruth Redmond set about the keeping of her vow, and track Devil Dick, the man who had wrecked her life, to the doom he so justly deserved.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DESERTED WIFE.

In the pretty little town of G—, in the mountains of Pennsylvania, a teacher of the little school, pleasantly located on the banks of a stream that wound round a bold hill, dismissed her half a hundred charges and wended her way homeward.

The scholars, boys and girls, went scattering away in every direction to their homes, while the teacher, her arms full of wild-flowers, gathered by her pupils, locked the school-house door and started homeward.

She possessed a thin, graceful form, and her face was that of one reared in refinement.

But the face was a sad one, and her eyes seemed to hold some sorrow that always haunted them.

Her path led along the stream, by a grand gateway leading into large and well-kept grounds, surrounding a mansion visible in the distance.

She hurried by the gate as though not wishing to look within, for once that mansion had been her home, there she had been born and reared.

Now she was a village school-teacher, and

wending her way to an humble little home where she dwelt alone with her mother.

As she approached the tiny cottage, with its flower-beds in front, she saw her mother seated upon the little piazza, and with her a visitor, a lady.

Entering the yard, she beheld the eyes of the visitor fixed upon her with a strange look that seemed to almost unnerve her.

Her mother, a sad-faced woman of fifty-five, with snow-white hair, arose and said:

"Ella, this lady is Miss Redmond, of Texas, and she has come to see you upon a business matter she tells me."

Ella Glenn greeted her visitor with some reserve, for who and what was she?

She put down her flowers and lunch-basket, and as her mother went out to get tea, she said:

"I do not think that we have ever met before, Miss Redmond."

"No, we never have; but we are both fellow-sufferers, from one who wronged us both, and I have come to see you, to hear the truth from your lips."

"I really am at a loss to understand you, Miss Redmond."

"I will make myself fully understood, for I do not mean to talk in riddles."

"You are known as Miss Ella Glenn, I understand?"

"I am."

"But you are the deserted wife of Richard Drummond?"

The face of the teacher became deadly pale now, and she uttered huskily:

"How do you, a stranger, know this?"

"I will tell you all in good time, Mrs. Drummond—"

"No, no! do not call me by that name."

"Is it not legally yours?"

"Yes."

"Then, why not?"

"Let me tell you that I gave it up forever, years ago."

"You have no divorce—"

"No, no! only such a one as is lasting, for my husband is dead."

"Richard Drummond?"

"Yes."

"He is not dead."

"Great God! is this true?"

"It is; for I saw him not two months ago."

"You saw him?"

"Yes, face to face, though I did not recognize him then."

"Then you are wrong, for he was killed in a railway accident in the West."

"When?"

"Eight years ago."

"Who told you so?"

"I saw an account of his death in the papers."

"It was sent you for a purpose, for he is alive."

"You know this?"

"I will tell you how well I know it, if you will only bear with me and tell me of your marriage with him."

"It is a sad story, and I deserved all I have suffered for my crime."

"The truth was, I loved a young man devotedly, the friend of Richard Drummond, and was engaged to him."

"But he went to the bad, committed forgery, and fled from the towns, and then I learned how Richard Drummond had done all in his power to save him."

"I do not know why, but I forgot Ralph and married Richard."

"Then he began to show the cloven foot, and both mother and I had given him full control of our estate."

"He literally robbed us of every dollar, sold an elegant home over our heads, and deserted me."

"This little home we purchased out of the wreck, and I am teaching to support my poor mother, whom I brought down to poverty in her old age."

"I took again my maiden name, and I have the sympathy of the people here, for after Richard Drummond fled, all his crimes were discovered."

"And perhaps his worst was to entrap Ralph Ross in crime, though he himself was the guilty one, force him to fly and then marry you for your money."

"You know this?" gasped Ella Glenn.

"I do, for I heard the dying confession of Ralph Ross, who was a cowboy in Texas—"

"He is dead?"

"Yes, he was killed by his old boyhood friend, who proved his worst foe, Richard Drummond."

"My God! this is terrible!"

"But do you know this to be true?"

"I closed Ralph Ross's eyes after death, I heard his last words, and he gave me your name, told me your sad story, and more: told me that Richard Drummond had been the one to give him his death wound."

"Heaven have mercy!"

"Now, you have suffered deeply, Miss Glenn, at the hands of Richard Drummond; but let me tell you how much more cruelly I have been made to feel, for I, as I believed, became the wife of the man whose lawful wife you were, and I, too, saw him squander my fortune, then desert me, leaving me, as he believed, dead."

"I have come here to seek you, to learn the story of his perfidy from your lips, that I might be nerved to keep a vow I have made to be avenged."

"Yes, Richard Drummond is *alive*; but when I send you a notice that he is *dead*, you may know that it is true."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RENEGADE STRIKES AGAIN.

It was many months before Ruth Redmond returned to her home in Texas.

She had remained several days in G—, and she and Ella Glenn had become devoted friends, strange as it may seem, with both the victims of one man's cruelty.

But when Ruth left, she had papers that were full statements of the crimes of Richard Drummond.

The old parents of Ralph Ross she had visited, and all that their son had been she shielded him, so that they should only feel kindness toward their dead boy.

Armed with all facts regarding the guilty life of Richard Drummond, Ruth Redmond had begun to play the part of a shadower.

She followed him step by step in his wanderings, from place to place, and in every case armed herself with proofs of his guilt.

At last her detective work led her to Mexico, and she visited the deserted home of Senor Inglis, stood by the grave of Ignacio Inglis, whom Richard Drummond had killed in a duel, and then tracked the man through his life of outlawry as chief of a band of Mexican raiders.

Into Texas she followed him, and there discovered how he had entered upon the life of a gambler and man-killer.

How he had discovered the secret of her inheritance, and selected her as one to destroy, and had then so nearly done so, after winning her love that for him had been almost idolatrous at first, but which now had turned into hatred equally as intense.

At last she returned to her home, and Bible Bill, in whose charge the ranch and all connected with it had been left, warmly welcomed her home.

He knew only that she had been north to seek friends and had no idea of her real work as a shadower.

"Well, Captain Ruth, I'm awful glad to see you back again, for though all has gone well at Sunset Ranch, there has been red work done at the ranches far to the north," said Bible Bill.

"What! have the Comanches been upon another raid?"

"That is just what they have been, Captain Ruth, only they struck to the northward and it would have been a complete surprise to the people, had not Buck Taylor been scouting above in the Indian country, saw their game and rode his horse to death to speed the alarm."

"That brave fellow is always rendering service to others," said Ruth earnestly.

"Yes, but I fear he has gone on his last trail, Captain Ruth, for the red-skins captured him and you know that means death, for the Comanches hate him as Satan does a preacher."

"And he was taken?" thoughtfully asked Ruth.

"Yes, they got him, though they had to fight hard to do it after they corralled him."

"When was this?"

"Some three months ago."

"So long?"

"Yes, miss."

"And you have not heard whether he is dead or alive?"

"No, miss, not a word."

"Was it the same chief who made the attack on us?"

"Yes, miss, it was the Death Hand."

"Ka-noon-ka?"

"That is the one; but do you know that I half believe he is a white man."

"Ah! a renegade!"

Bible Bill nodded and Ruth said:

"Why do you think so?"

"Well, Captain Ruth, I heard him give orders when he attacked us, and though he spoke in

the Comanche tongue he commanded in the sharp, ringing voice of an army officer.

"Then too I saw him, and his bearing was that of a white man."

"Well, Bible Bill, don't speak of this to others, but try and find out, if you can, if any one believes as you do."

"I will, Captain Ruth; but my pard Buck was not the only one captured by the Comanches?"

"Who else was a sufferer?"

"Captain Hassan's little daughter was taken, and they do not even now know whether she is dead or alive."

"Poor child! and this same chief it was who captured her?"

"Yes, miss, and the shock nearly killed her mother."

"I do not wonder at it," and Ruth Redmond seemed most deeply moved at all she had heard.

"Well, Bible Bill, I am sorry to bear what you have to tell me, of how that cruel chief had struck another blow, and I am determined to be prepared for him should he come this way again."

"It will be a good idea, Captain Ruth."

"Well, we will talk it over and hit upon some plan, for, if alive, Buck Taylor must be rescued, and also that poor child."

"Come to me to-morrow and we will decide what is best to be done; but I wish to thank you now for your devoted care of my home and my interests."

"You have done nobly, Bible Bill."

"I am glad that you are pleased, Captain Ruth," answered Bible Bill and he went off happy at heart at the praise Ruth had bestowed upon him.

And when he departed Ruth paced to and fro with thoughtful, clouded brow.

"Yes, he has struck again, and his next blow will be at me."

"But Buck Taylor and that poor child must be rescued, if they yet live, and then I must strike my blow, must capture that renegade chief, Death Hand, and when he is in my power may Heaven have mercy on him, *for I never will*."

CHAPTER XVII.

IN DOUBT.

MONTHS passed, and like wildfire ran the rumor along the line of settlements that the Comanches had met with a crushing defeat, one they would long remember.

Buckskin Sam, the captain of the rangers, had gone alone upon the trail to see if his young pard Buck Taylor was dead, or still a captive among the Comanches.

He had discovered that Buck Taylor, for some strange reason, had been spared by the Indian chief, and was preparing to make his escape, carrying with him the little captive of the Comanches, the daughter of Captain Hassan.

Buck Taylor had planned well, and aided by Buckskin Sam, he made his escape with little Belle Hassan, and led his pursuers into an ambush where they were shot down without mercy by the cowboy cavalry who were anxious to avenge the ranchmen.

At the same time Buckskin Sam and his rangers, with cavalry from the fort, had attacked the Indian village in the mountains, so that the blow dealt was a double one and most deadly.

But no one of the pale-faces knew whether the great chief Ka-noon-ka had been slain or had escaped.

He had been seen in the thickest of the fight, where the Indians were led into an ambush by Buck Taylor, and then he had disappeared, and it was said that he had been killed.

In the excitement of the moment, and anxiety to move away to the support of the soldiers, the dead had been hastily buried, and no one had thought of looking for the body of the chief until when the story of the fight was told along the line of ranches.

Ruth Redmond's first question was:

"Was the chief Death Hand slain?"

"Yes."

"Who saw him killed?"

This question no one could answer.

"Who saw him after he was killed?"

No one responded to this question.

"Is there any proof that he is dead?"

No proof could be given.

Then Ruth Redmond turned to Bible Bill and said:

"I wish you to have a dozen men ready to move within a couple of hours with me."

"I shall take the ambulance, and in it our provisions and spades and shovels."

"And which trail will you take, Captain Ruth?"

"I shall follow the trail of the victorious ranchmen back to the scene of the ambush, for I must know whether the chief Ka-noon-ka is dead or alive."

Bible Bill was one to obey implicitly, and three hours before sunset the fair owner of Sunset Ranch rode out of the yard, followed by her band of cowboys and the ambulance, which, greatly to his distress, Primus had been forced to drive.

But Primus was a fine cook and an excellent hand in camp, and Ruth wished him along, while she could not but smile at the weeping farewell of his wife to him, who said:

"Yer'll be scalpt, Primus, and I'll never see yer ag'in this side o' Jordan's stormy banks."

Primus was not encouraged by this parting, but the word of his mistress was law, and so he went along as driver of the ambulance, while he muttered:

"Dis yer' ambulance hev got ter be a reg'lar huss, or dead-cart, and I hain't gwine ter hev no luck long as I drives it."

The trail was a good one to follow, and Ruth pushed rapidly on, camping twenty miles from home the first night out.

The next morning an early start was made, for with the first glimmer of dawn they were on the trail.

It was nearly sunset when at last the scene of ambush was reached, the spot where there had been a fierce battle between pale-faces and red-skins.

A camping-place was first found, and then on foot Ruth went over the scene, accompanied by Bible Bill.

Prowling coyotes, digging at graves, ran yelping away at their approach, and vultures soared rapidly into the air.

The graves of the whites were few in number and apart from the others, and more care had been taken with them, while those of the red-skins were in the canyon where the fight had occurred, and were quite numerous.

It was too late to begin work that night, so Ruth and Wild Bill returned to the camp to supper, which Primus had prepared, though he constantly kept his eyes open for the appearance of a red-skin, which he firmly believed would appear.

Although Primus called the ambulance a hearse, Ruth showed no dread of sleeping in it, and as they were in a dangerous locality, in spite of the recent defeat of the Indians, three men were put on post as sentinels.

Up with the dawn they had breakfast, and then the cowboys set about their disagreeable work of opening the graves, not one of the men understanding the motive of Ruth for wishing it done, yet obeying her willingly.

As they set to work she said in her quiet way:

"Boys, I am in search of a white-skin hidden by Indian paint."

"See if you can find among these dead warriors the body of Ka-noon-ka the chief."

"But was he a white man, Cap'n Ruth?" asked one.

"He was; so now you know what you are here to discover."

With this information the cowboys set to work with a will, and the graves of the dead warriors were opened one by one and the bodies examined for a white skin hidden under the war-paint of the savage.

But the search was useless, and as Ruth Redmond turned the head of her horse homeward, she said to herself:

"He was not killed as it was reported."

"I did not believe that he was, for his life is strangely spared through every danger, spared for me to take."

"Now to find him, for find him I must."

Without adventure the party arrived at the ranch, and the next day, after a long talk with Ruth, Bible Bill set off upon a lone trail.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE COWBOY PARSON.

"WELL, Bible Bill, what brought you over to our camp, for glad I am to see you?" and Buck Taylor sprung from a *serape*, where he had been stretched out at full length upon the ground, and grasped the hand of Bible Bill, who rode into his camp of cowboys.

"Well, Pard Buck, I came to see you and have a talk with you."

"But let me congratulate you upon your escape from the Comanches?"

"I was playing in great luck, Bill, was I not?"

"I think so, and you rescued Captain Hassan's daughter too, I heard?"

"Oh, yes, we were captives together, and I played my cards to escape with the pretty little thing."

"And did it?"

"Oh, yes, and led the red-skins into an ambush that pretty well wiped my pursuers out."

"So I heard; but was that old Indian chief Ka-noon-ka killed, Buck?"

Buck Taylor started, and then said slowly:

"Bible Bill, I do not know."

"You didn't see him among the dead?"

"No."

"I am sorry, for somehow I believe that chief was a white renegade."

"Bible Bill?"

"Yes."

"You are right, for the Death Hand was a white man."

"Well, if he escaped, look out for more trouble, for he will seek a terrible revenge."

"I think not, Bible Bill, and I'll tell you why."

"You see, I had met the chief before, and once saved his life, when he was in the mining country."

"Now, in turn, he kept the Indians from killing me, and was, in fact, quite good to me."

"He had planned to give little Belle Hassan up for a large ransom, and I was to arrange it all, when I was to also go free; but I did not trust him, and so planned to rescue little Belle without a ransom."

"With the ransom the chief intended to get out of Texas, I am sure, for he was pretty well assured that he had about come to the end of his rope."

"After the battle I never thought of looking for his body, as I was told by some of the men that he had been killed, and I could not tell you whether he was slain or not."

"He was not."

"How do you know?"

"Well, I visited the Red Cliffs, the scene of the ambush, and saw every body buried there taken up."

"And not one was the chief?"

"No."

"But you expected to find an Indian, and he was splendidly painted."

"No, I looked for a white-skin."

"You did?"

"Yes."

"But how did you know that he was a white renegade?"

"I did not, but the one who was in command of the little party did."

"Who was it, may I ask?"

"Captain Ruth."

"Ah! the Lady of Sunset Ranch!"

"The same."

"How did she know?"

"That I do not know; but certain it is, ever since she heard that you were Death Hand's prisoner, she has tried to effect your rescue."

"It was most kind of her."

"Well, what knowledge she may have of this renegade chief, or her motive for hunting him down, I do not know; but she is determined to know if he is dead or alive, and when the graves did not tell the secret, she sent me to you, to ask you if he was not a white man, if he was killed in the fight, or escaped."

"Well, Bible Bill, as I should have been more particular, knowing all I did, and satisfied myself that the chief was killed, or escaped, you can say to your pretty Captain Ruth that I will make it my business to discover the fact for her, and whether he returned to his Indian allies, or skipped the country for the country's good."

"Now the boys are coming into camp, and they'll be awful glad to meet you, Bible Bill, and give you a chance to get in a sermon at us too."

"I'll be glad to, Buck, for you are all an unmitigated lot of sinners, you and your boys in buckskin, and if I don't help you, not the soul of one of you will ever be saved."

Buck Taylor laughed, and replied:

"Well, Bible Bill, I am so glad to be pards with you again, that I'll let you corral the whole lot of us to-night, and preach us all to sleep, so hunt up a text that will fit us wicked cowboys."

"Pard Buck, I'll do it," was Bible Bill's answer.

And he was as good as his word, for that night he did "corral" the cowboys around the campfire, and such a sermon as he preached they had never heard before.

He pitched into them tongue and spur, rattled off appalling pictures of what they would suffer hereafter, if they did not mend their evil ways, sung several appropriate hymns, and ended with

a prayer which one of the cowboys remarked: "roped in all creation."

"Say, Bible Bill, you've left out the most important part of the services," said one of the men.

"What was that, pard?" asked the cowboy parson, anxiously.

"The collection."

"So I did, and as you remind me of it, I'll just say that there's a poor cowboy down in the settlement dying with the consumption, and it would gladden his latter days to have a little dust to buy good things with, so here goes for a collection for him, and as you suggested it, pard, you lead off with a liberal pan-out of cash."

The cowboys cheered, and the man chipped in a ten dollar bill, and others followed suit, until Bible Bill said:

"I thank you, boys, for your hearts are in the right place, sinful as you are, and the dying cowboy will bless you for this."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FUGITIVE.

It was the night following the ambush of the Indians, who had pursued Buck Taylor after his escape, and a horseman was riding rapidly along through the darkness.

He had pressed his horse hard, for the animal seemed very tired, so much so that when he came to a steep range of hills, he dismounted and led him up the trail.

He did not hesitate, so appeared to know just where he was going, not being at a loss to keep the trail even in the darkness.

"I fear this blow will destroy my power with the red-skins," he muttered again and again, as he went along.

At last he found himself in the midst of a mountain range, and still walking, while his fatigued horse followed, he said half aloud:

"Another half-hour and I will reach the village, and then I will see if those who were my friends have turned my foes, when they know that the white man I forced them to spare, and the little girl have not only escaped, but in pursuing them my band of splendid warriors have been almost wiped out."

"Some of the braves escaped beyond all doubt, and as they went the nearest trail, they will have told all— Ha! what is that?"

He paused and listened, while to his ears in the gray of early dawn came the rattle of firearms.

"My God! soldiers are firing yonder!

"They have attacked my Indian village and I am indeed a fugitive."

"I must seek a hiding-place and quickly, for if the soldiers do not capture and hang me the red-skins will find me and put me to death by the cruelest torture."

"I am indeed a fallen king, great yesterday, to-day a fugitive."

"Come, my good horse, we must seek a hiding-place, and fortunately I know of one which I defy even a Comanche to track us into."

He turned quickly back, as the sounds of firing increased, mingling with cheers, wild yells and the shrieks of squaws and children.

It was the attack upon the Indian village, guided by Buckskin Sam.

Quickly along the ridge went the fugitive, and as the day dawned, it showed him to be partly in Indian dress, wearing the war-bonnet of a head chief, and with his face fully stained and painted to disguise his white skin.

He mounted his horse now, as the cheers resounded louder, and used his spurs to urge on the tired animal.

For several miles he went along, and at last turned sharply to the left, and dismounting, urged his horse up over a rocky ridge that seemed impassable.

But once over, he came to a trail going down the mountain-side, and this led him into a fertile valley which seemed to have no outlet.

Here he stripped his horse of saddle and bridle and turned him loose, while he took some food from his haversack, ate a little, and spreading his blankets, lay down to rest.

He did not rise until nightfall, and leaving his horse still to rest and feed upon the luxurious grass with which the valley abounded, he went up the trail on foot, followed the ridge, and at last drew near the village of the Comanches.

Nearer and nearer he crept, for there were no sounds reaching his ears to tell him that the red-skins were there.

"They have fled to their mountain camp, and the soldiers have also gone," he muttered.

Nearer and nearer he crept, until at last he reached the spot where the village had been.

All was ruin and desolation there, scattered and torn tepees, the smoldering ruins of the large Council and Medicine Lodges, and a long

row of graves, where the soldiers had hastily buried the dead.

A few wolves scuttled away at his approach, and these told him he was the only living being in the ruined Indian camp.

Straight to the rocky point, upon which had stood his own tepee, he went.

It, too, had been burned, but he felt his way to a certain spot, where stood a boulder weighing several hundred pounds.

He placed his shoulder against it and pushed one end around a couple of feet, the act revealing an aperture in the rock beneath.

An exultant expression broke from his lips as he thrust his hands into the hole, and he said eagerly:

"All is here! I have not been robbed at least."

"Yes, all I possess in the world, a few pitiful hundreds in gold, half-a-dozen disguises, in fact my entire stock in trade with which to begin life anew."

"And I will begin it anew with a vengeance, for I have a future to make now and revenge to gain."

"Yes, I live now for revenge and gold."

CHAPTER XX.

THE RECOGNITION.

So terrible had been the defeat of the Comanches, that as time passed on the scouts who penetrated into the Indian country reported that they were in hiding in the furthest fastnesses of the mountains and appeared afraid to go out except in large bands on hunting expeditions.

Buck Taylor, with intention to keep his promise to find out if their chief, Ka-noon-Ka, was yet alive, took his whole force of cowboys one day, and made a rapid sweep up into the Indian country.

They surprised several hunting parties, and captured prisoners just to question them about their chief.

They all told the same story, that the Death Hand had led the band that pursued the escaped captives, and they had been drawn into an ambush from which but few had escaped, and then and there the chief Death Hand had been killed, for not a warrior had seen him after the battle began.

The prisoners taken Buck Taylor would release, upon condition that they "talked with a straight tongue," as he expressed it to them.

Not one, warrior, squaw or child taken, told other than the same story about the chief, and so Buck Taylor felt convinced at least of the fact that the chief had not returned to the Comanches, whether he had escaped or not, the ambush.

So back to his camping-place went Buck Taylor with his men, and arriving there he sat down and wrote Bible Bill a letter, telling him of his three weeks' scouting in the Indian country and all that he had discovered about Chief Ka-noon-ka.

This letter was sent by special courier to Sunset Ranch, and Bible Bill hastened with it to Ruth and gave it to her to read.

Her face brightened as she read it, while she said:

"I felt that he was not killed, and that he would cross my path again."

The day after the reception of Buck's letter, a stranger arrived at the ranch.

He was an old man with long gray hair and beard, wore gold spectacles and had a stoop in his walk.

His shoulders were very round, almost humped in fact, and his dress was worn and faded.

He had met Bible Bill on the prairie and had asked for shelter and food, and the good-hearted scout had at once taken him to the ranch to Ruth who bade him welcome most heartily.

The stranger was mounted upon a sorry-looking horse, carried an old-fashioned rifle and revolver, and it was a wonder how he had gotten through the country without molestation.

He told a pitiful story of how his wife was dead and he was looking for his son, who had come to Texas some years before and had a ranch there, but just where he did not know.

Ruth questioned all the cowboys regarding their knowledge of such a person as the old man described his son to be, and only one remembered to have heard the name and said that the one he knew answered the description given and lived seventy miles southwest of Sunset Ranch.

Ruth found the old man a very clever talker, and sat up until a late hour talking to him; but she could not urge him to remain a few days and rest, as he said he was most anxious to be

on his way and find his son, and must start early the next morning.

But she ordered a better horse given the old man than the one he rode, had a bag of provisions prepared for him, and gave him an extra blanket to keep him warm, should he be caught out all night between the ranches.

The stranger went on his way, profuse in his thanks, and Ruth watched him until he was out of sight across the plain.

Then she began to pace up and down the piazza, a thoughtful look upon her face, while she asked herself over and over again the question:

"Where have I seen that man before?"

But for the life of her she could not recall where she had met him.

"He said he did not remember ever having seen me before, and yet I am not mistaken, for I have met him I am sure."

"I feel sorry for him, and hope that he will find his son all right; but somehow I do not like him in spite of his gray hairs."

"It is provoking not to be able to recall him, for know him I certainly do, or have done so."

And all the morning Ruth worried over her being unable to recall the old man until old Auntie Nannie called her to dinner and asked:

"See here, Missy Ruth, who does that ole man remind you of, honey?"

"I have tried hard to remember, Aunt Nannie, but cannot."

"Yer can't?"

"No."

"Waal, I doesn't like him."

"Why?"

"Cause he reminds me of that devil man as made you suffer so, boney."

"Aunt Nannie!" and the words came from the lips of Ruth almost in a scream, fairly startling the negress, while she sprung to her feet and continued:

"You are right! that man was none other than Richard Drummond in disguise."

"Quick! send Primus after the men with all haste, while I get ready for the saddle, for now I know who that man is."

CHAPTER XXI.

ON THE STRANGER'S TRAIL.

OLD Nannie was fairly startled at the excitement shown by her young mistress at her words.

She knew there was an unwritten law in the household never to mention the name of Devil Dick or Richard Drummond.

Against the will of her uncle and aunt, Ruth had married him, though they had only entered a mild protest.

Then after her sufferings as the wife of the desperate man, she had returned to them; she was received with open arms.

She had returned a mere wreck of her former beautiful self, and old Nannie's prophecy had been:

"Dat poor chile gwine straight to her grave sart'in and sure."

But the prediction of the negress was wrong, for Ruth had rallied quickly, once she was back amid the old scenes, and the name of Richard Drummond was never spoken before her.

Time passed and her beauty of face and form returned to her, and she gradually assumed the management of affairs, to relieve her uncle of all she could.

She also aided her aunt in the household affairs, and it was hoped that she would yet be perfectly happy again.

Then came the raid of the Comanches in which her uncle lost his life, the death of her aunt following, and her discovery, through the dying cowboy, Ralph Ross, of the fact, that Devil Dick not only was alive, for she had been allowed to believe him dead, but that he was the renegade white chief of the Indians.

Now, when all believed that the chief, whom men knew only as Ka-noon-ka, an Indian, was slain at the ambush at Red Cliffs, an old stranger appears at the ranch who haunts her most persistently with the knowledge that she has seen him before.

And in comes old Nannie who has penetrated the disguise and who felt sure that the pretended old man was none other than Richard Drummond.

Like a flash it came to her that he it was, and old Primus was sent flying after the cowboys, over to their camp half a mile distant from the house.

"It all comes to me now."

"That was Richard Drummond, in spite of his stoop, the hump on his back, gold glasses and false gray beard and hair."

"Yes, now I see through his disguise, and he must be taken, yes, *taken alive*."

"I will at once get ready for the trail."

Nannie was ordered to prepare provisions, and upon the return of Primus to tell him to saddle and bridle her best horse for her.

Primus soon returned with a dozen cowboys at his heels, Bible Bill leading, and all anxious to know what the urgent demand meant.

"Boys, I have recognized the old man who was here."

"He is an impostor, a wolf in sheep's clothing, and we must capture him."

"A hundred pesos to the man who catches him, though remember he must not be harmed, but taken alive."

"Come, boys, I will lead you on his trail."

The cowboys gave a cheer, and springing to her saddle, her belt of arms buckled about her slender waist, her rifle slung at her back, Ruth Redmond started off with Bible Bill at her side.

"Which way did he go, Captain Ruth?" asked Bible Bill, who was a perfect trailer.

"This way."

"I watched him until he was out of sight."

"See, there is the trail his horse left, and we can readily follow him."

Away they all rode then over the prairie, going at a rapid gallop, and following the trail of the old man's horse without the slightest trouble.

For miles they held on at the same rapid pace, and then Bible Bill asked:

"When did he leave, Captain Ruth?"

"Just after breakfast, which I had at seven o'clock."

"Then he has had all of four hours' start of us."

"Yes, and if he rode rapidly that means a good many miles, but if he rode at a slow pace, then at the gait we are riding we should catch up with him in a couple of hours more."

"I should think so," was Bible Bill's reply, and the horses were kept at the same rapid pace.

At length they came to a place where a fresh trail crossed the one they were following.

It seemed to the experienced eyes of the cowboy trailers as though the two horsemen had met just where their trails crossed and halted for a talk of some minutes.

But the trail they had been following held on as before, and they well knew the track of the horse ridden by the old man, so that there was no mistake.

Two men were, however, detailed from the party and sent off to follow up the trail that crossed the one leading from Sunset Ranch, and once more did Ruth urge on her horsemen at the same rapid pace, and all saw that, for some reason, unknown to them, she was in deadly earnest in her determination to capture the old man.

The hard pace had been kept up for some hours, and it proved that the old man had by no means been riding slowly, but at a gait which showed he might dread pursuit.

At last, far across the prairie, a horseman was seen, and halting, Ruth Redmond leveled her glass upon him.

One quick look, and she fairly shouted:

"That is our man!"

"Come on!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TWO HORSEMAN.

MORE rapidly than before did Ruth Redmond lead her cowboys after the horseman they saw far before them upon the prairie, and they began to overhaul him readily.

It was soon seen that he was riding leisurely, as if all unconscious of the coming of those behind him. He was heading toward a clump of timber, where he evidently expected to seek a camping-place for the night.

The sun was upon the prairie horizon, while they were yet a full mile away. As if wishing to expedite matters, they rode on still more rapidly.

But, twilight fell, and found them still a considerable distance from him, and they discovered, much to their surprise, that the lone horseman seemed to know of their coming, for he suddenly halted and faced them.

"Surround him, boys," cried Ruth, and while she rode straight on, toward the man, the cowboys divided right and left and obliqued to completely encircle him.

There was a quarter moon, and it gave enough light to reveal that the man stood as though at bay; and whether he had little faith in the speed of his horse or not, he made no effort to escape.

Right down toward him rode Ruth Redmond,

her revolver drawn, and crying out, as she did so:

"Hands up, Devil Dick, for I want you!"

The man made no reply and, a moment after, Ruth drew rein by his side, her revolver covering him, while the cowboys, who now had circled around him, came to a halt, cutting off all chance of escape, and rendering rein and arm useless.

"I guess you've taken me for the wrong man, miss, for I'm the one you were so good to last night," said the horseman, quietly.

"Yes, and if you unmask I will find that you are Devil Dick Drummond in disguise," was the sharp reply—words that let the secret out to the cowboys, of who it was she believed the man in reality to be.

They knew of her sad story, but not one ever made reference to it, and now they felt that she was going to hit back at the man who had wrecked her life.

"Take off my mask, miss?"

"Yes."

"I don't wear any mask," the man said in a surprised way.

"Well, you wear a false beard and wig, to bide your evil face and true character."

"No, no, miss; there's nothing false in my beard or hair."

"And the hump on your back, too?"

"It's natural, miss."

"Just see if my beard is false, and my hair a wig."

Ruth could hardly believe that she was mistaken, and said:

"See if he speaks the truth, Bible Bill."

The latter obeyed, and with no gentle hand, twirled the horseman's beard and long hair.

"The beard sticks closer than a brother, Captain Ruth, and the wig is certainly stuck here by nature, while the hump grew right on his shoulders, and no mistake, the cowboy, Bible Bill, declared.

"This is not Devil Dick, for I heard your words to him, and that you suspected it was that man."

"My poor friend, forgive me, for I have been unkind to you, where I meant only kindness until, after your departure, I was convinced that you were in disguise, and really was the man who had wronged me too cruelly for me to ever forgive him."

"Can I do ought to atone for my mistake?"

"No harm done, miss, for mistakes will occur you know, and if you suspected me, I don't blame you for wishing to find out the truth. It was your right to do so."

"May I ask if you met any one on your way here?"

"Yes, miss, I met a man who stopped and had some talk with me."

"Did you know him?"

"Oh no, miss, for I'm a stranger in these parts. He crossed my trail and we met and had a talk."

"Ah? And did he tell you who he was?"

"He said he was a ranchman, and directed me to come this way, saying I'd find a good camping-place on the trail for the night."

"Well, my friend, I am sorry to have made the mistake I did. I sincerely hope you will find your son, and if ever you come our way again stop and see me."

"Good-night!"

She held out her hand. The old man grasped it warmly, and then went on his way, while Ruth and her cowboys turned back on the trail.

It was after midnight when they got back to the ranch, and they discovered that the two men sent out upon the trail that crossed that of the old man had not returned.

The next morning, however, just as Ruth came out upon the piazza after breakfast, she saw them coming across the prairie.

"Well, Carl, what did you find out?" she asked as the men dismounted, and she called to old Nannie to have breakfast for them.

"We got back to where you left us, Captain Ruth, just at daylight, and seeing by your trail that you had returned, came right on home."

"That was right; but did you find your man?"

"Yes, miss."

"And you knew him?"

"Yes, miss."

"Who was he?"

Carl looked at his companion in an embarrassed way, and the other nodded, so he said:

"Well, Captain Ruth, the man we trailed, pardon us for saying anything unpleasant, was—was Devil Dick."

"What?" and the face of the woman turned as pale as death.

"Yes, miss, it was Devil Dick."

"You are sure?"

"I know him but too well, Captain Ruth, for he killed my brother years ago," was the response, and Ruth said to herself:

"I followed the wrong horseman."

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN DISGUISE.

THE thought that the old man who had been her guest, had reminded her of Dick Drummond, and that following him she had actually crossed the path of the real man whom she sought, puzzled Ruth considerably.

She could not understand just how it was, and sending the men in to have breakfast at the ranch, she paced up and down the piazza to collect her thoughts and become more calm.

"If only I had followed that other trail," she said over and over again to herself.

At last the two men came out, more than pleased with the breakfast Nannie had given them, and pointing to chairs upon the piazza, Ruth said:

"Sit down, for I wish to ask you some questions."

They obeyed and she went on:

"You followed the trail as I told you?"

"Yes, miss."

"And where did it lead?"

"To Mustang Center, Miss."

"Well, tell me about it."

"We went along for several miles, miss, when we saw that the trail was going to Mustang Center, so, as I knew the short cut across the Buffalo Ford, I told Merton to keep on after his man, while I headed him off and from some ambush got a look at him.

"So Merton followed on the trail, while I cut across by Buffalo Ford.

"I reached the ford, staked my horse out down the stream, and got into a position among the rocks and timbers where I could see distinctly any one crossing.

"I had not been there ten minutes when my man came in sight.

"To my surprise I saw the old man who was your guest night before last, miss, and whom you supposed you were trailing."

"Impossible! for we found our man, and he was not in disguise as I expected him to be."

"Well, Captain Ruth, the man who came in sight was the very old man I saw here, only he rode a different horse."

"You amaze me, Carl."

"I'll amaze you more, miss, when you hear what I have to tell you."

"Go on."

"He halted by the ford, dismounted, and hitched his horse.

"Then he took off the saddle-bags from his saddle and went to a rock jutting out in the water.

"I could see him distinctly, and opening the saddle-bags he took out a suit of black clothing like a parson's, a black hat, pair of spectacles and a wig of straight black hair.

"He placed them upon the rock and then began to disrobe from the well-worn suit that he wore.

"Then he took off a long gray beard and wig, and the face of Dick Drummond was revealed, only his black mustache was shaven off, and his long black hair cut close."

"Can this be possible?"

"I cannot mistake that man, Miss Ruth, for he killed my brother, Joe Winter, and wounded me at the same time, though Joe was in the wrong to bring on a fight as he did, I admit."

"It was then Dick Drummond?"

"It was beyond all doubt, and I was greatly tempted to kill him then and there, but resisted as I did not know how you would feel about it."

"Do not kill him, for he must be taken alive," Ruth said.

Then she added:

"Tell me more."

"He washed his face well with soap, taking off certain stained lines to indicate age, and the darker hue of the skin."

"Then he proceeded to shave, with a razor and glass he took from the saddle-bags, after which he put on his clerical suit, black hat, white tie and glasses, and no one would have ever recognized Devil Dick in the man he then appeared to be."

"He stowed away in the saddle-bags all his other traps, then mounted his horse and rode away carrying his revolvers under his coat-tails out of sight."

"And then?"

"I waited until Merton came along, told him what I had seen, and we rode in together to Mustang Center, getting there just at dark."

"Then I pointed out to Merton my parson, and we took a good look at him."

"Merton went up and had a talk with him; and said he told him he was an itinerant gospel-peddler, going from place to place making miners turn from their evil way."

"The villain," hissed Ruth, while Merton said:

"He offered to pray with me, but I told him I had already been converted by Bible Bill, and after we got supper at the tavern, Carl and me lit out for home, as we had no orders to do anything else, Captain Ruth, and Parson Devil Dick told me he intended to stop in Mustang Center for several days."

"Ah! he said that did he?"

"Yes, miss."

"Then go to the camps and get what rest you can, for after dinner I wish you to return with me to Mustang Center, and tell Bible Bill I desire him to go also, and to take four men with him; but how do you account for this man and the one I followed meeting?"

"I believe they were pards, Captain Ruth, and that it was Devil Dick who came here to the ranch."

"When they met on the prairie they changed horses, and you followed the wrong man; but was your man hump-backed too?"

"Yes, and it was real."

"And Devil Dick, I forgot to say, took off his hump; he copied the man whom you overtook in his make-up, that is certain."

"Well, we start on Devil Dick's trail to-day," said Ruth firmly.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE HERMIT.

"PARD, I want ter speak ter yer!"

The speaker was behind a rock, glancing over the sights of a rifle, and he aimed full at the heart of the one he addressed.

The latter was a horseman, and he had just dismounted to go into camp for the night.

It was Devil Dick, and it was the second day after his visit to the ruined camp of the Comanches over whom he had been a ruler.

He was so fairly caught by the one who covered him with his rifle, that he made not the slightest show of resistance.

To have done so would have simply sealed his fate.

So he glanced at the head over the rock, and answered coolly:

"Well, pard, what have you to say?"

"You be Devil Dick, I take it?"

"Well, what if I am?"

"We have met before."

"I cannot see you in your hiding-place, so cannot say."

"We has, and I owes you a debt of gratitude."

"Indeed?"

"I does."

"And repay it by covering me with your rifle."

"Well, yer see I are a very particular man."

"I see."

"Had you seen me afore I did you, why I might have got a bullet, fer yer see I knows you is a man as carries his life in his hand."

"Well?"

"As I wanted ter be safe I concluded to cover you with my gun, and when I were in no danger we c'u'd talk it over."

"Talk what over?"

"Say it's peace between us, and I puts down my gun."

"So be it."

The man from behind the rock disappeared, and a moment after came into view near the desperado.

If he saw that meanwhile the renegade had gotten his revolver in hand he paid no attention to it, but said:

"My little camp hain't far from here, so come along and put up thar for ther night, for all I has yer is welcome to."

"I know you now," and the renegade put his revolver in his belt again and held out his hand.

"You are Red Hand, the Hermit."

"Yes, and I mind one time when a party of young Comanche bucks brought me a prisoner into their village, you set me free, and I never forgot a favor or an injury."

"Nor do I; but what are you doing here?"

"I told you my camp was near by, and you are welcome."

He led the way, the renegade following with his horse, and after a walk of a mile they came to a log cabin situated upon the spur of a mountain.

Beneath it was a valley where several horses

were staked out, and a couple of large dogs lay before the door of the cabin.

"Yes, sir, the Injuns calls this Great Spirit Valley, and none of 'em ever comes here, while white men is too scared of meetin' Comanches here ter hunt 'round much, so I gits let alone and lives here pretty quiet."

"What do you do?"

"I traps, hunt, fish, eat and sleep."

"You must enjoy life."

"I does, for it is better ter live here in solitude than go to ther settlements and git hanged, for I guesses I'm something like you."

"How is that?"

"Can't live among my fellow-men in peace."

"Yer see I am deformed, and this hump on my back causes men ter make fun of me, and the man that does do it I kill—see?"

"Yes."

"I'll tell you that once I was rich, and, I received a college education; but I was imbibited with the world on account of my hideous deformity."

"But I had a heart and loved a young girl."

"I believed that she loved me, understand, strange as it was, and we were to be married, she was to be mistress of my elegant home."

"But reverses came, for my guardian squandered my fortune and out of the wreck I got just one thousand dollars."

"Then the woman I loved laughed at me and told me she could have put up with a hump-backed husband who was rich, but poor he would be as a nightmare to her."

"Well, I killed her—see?"

"That sent me a fugitive from the law and I hid myself in Mexico."

"Men derided me, and I kept my hand busy taking life—see?"

"Yes, I see."

"Well, I was forced to hide, so came here, and I have been here ever since."

"Your bucks found me and took me to your village, for you are a renegade, I take it?"

"I am."

"Well, you see my home, and you are welcome here, Chief Ka-noon-ka."

The renegade had listened with deep interest to the strange story of the man, and said when he ceased speaking:

"I am not Chief Ka-noon-ka now, for the Comanche village was destroyed, and I led a band of warriors in pursuit of some white captives, and we were ambushed and almost destroyed, so I lost my hold upon the Indians."

"And what will you do now?"

"Like you I am a fugitive."

"Yes, I guessed that by your turning renegade."

"But I have two things to live for."

"What are they?"

"Gold and revenge."

"Good! so have I, and I believe together we can make gold, and whenever I kill a man I satiate my revenge against mankind! See?"

"Well, we will talk it over, and see what we can do together; but my plan is to turn road-agent and raider."

"There's money in both; but you need men."

"And I know where to get them."

"Good! I am with you, my friend, in all devility we can concoct together," and the hump-backed hermit laughed viciously.

CHAPTER XXV.

A COMPACT OF CRIME.

DEVIL DICK was perfectly delighted at meeting the deformed man, who had so boldly confessed to him the crimes of his life.

In the Great Spirit Valley he would have nothing to fear from a prowling band of redskins, and he well knew that only a large force of soldiers would dare penetrate that far into the Comanche country.

The hermit was a man to enjoy his comfort, as was soon evident.

His larder was well stocked with game, and half a dozen sides of bacon were hung up there, too.

Then over in a little bit of rich ground which he had fenced in, he had planted a garden, and potatoes, turnips onions and beets he had laid aside in plentiful supplies.

A bag of hard-tack and another of crackers, with flour and meal showed that he had some means of procuring supplies, and it caused the renegade to ask:

"How do you get supplies, pard?"

"Well, you see I go over to the stage trail and the driver is a pard o' mine, as I pay him well, so I give him a bundle of pelts and every two

months he fetches me back supplies, so I never have to go to the settlements to buy.

"I am fond of good living, for I was raised to it, and we won't starve, that is certain, for I have on hand now several thousand dollars' worth of pelts."

"Well, I shall be glad to rest here a few weeks with you, and then we will start upon a plan I have for getting gold."

"I am with you, if I can get a chance to kill too."

"Yes, you will not have to miss the enjoyment you seem to take in putting a fellow-being out of the world."

"Well, they all hate me because I am deformed, so I return their hatred ten-fold."

"If they laugh at me, they insult me, and then I avenge myself—see?"

"Yes, but to my plan?"

"What is it?"

"There are hundreds of rich ranches along the border line."

"Yes."

"The rancheros all have money and keep it at home, and some of their wives wear jewels galore, while others have silver plate with them worth much."

"Now, I can get together a band of men and strike the richest of these houses on stated nights."

"We can dash in, robbing only one or two at a time, and be off in an hour's time."

"I know those that have plenty of booty, but it will be well to have a spy visit them all and give full particulars, as to number of cowboys and just what is to be gained."

"You see, with a dozen good men, mounted upon the very best horses, we can go by night on slow marches, to a point near the place we intend to strike, and so we will reach the place without tiring our animals."

"Our first duty will be to creep in and lead off or cripple every horse, to check pursuit."

"Then we can do our work and get away, retreating to some point where we must have arrangements for covering up our tracks, or lead to the belief that we go across the Rio Grande."

"Yes, I see."

"Now, in some of these ranches dwell people of wealth, and to kidnap a wife, or child, will bring us big ransom."

"So it will."

"There is one ranch in particular that I desire to visit, for revenge and gold."

"You see, I have reason to know that the one who dwells there has received recent knowledge of a large fortune left her."

"A woman?"

"Yes, and if I get her into my power I can get the fortune, and then good-by to this wild life of dread."

"I see."

"Now, the place to store all our booty is just here, with you, and we can bring our captives here, awaiting ransom."

"Yes."

"And we can so cover up our trails that no one will ever suspect that our retreat is here."

"I can do that for you most fully, for we will prepare for it, and back of my cabin is a cavern which runs back through the ridge, and I could hide a regiment there."

"If any one came here, they could find nothing but an old deformed man, hiding the shame of his deformity from the eyes of his fellow-men."

"Yes, and I am cheered with the hope that we can do well together, form a compact, in fact, that will enrich us both."

"So be it."

"Now, do you know any men that we can get?"

"I know as choice a lot of devils as Satan would wish to have serve him."

"Good! where are they?"

"In the mining-camps and on the prairies."

"How can you reach them?"

"Well, they once belonged to a band of cut-throats I had under my command; but I tired of the hard life, and sent them away."

"But they are bound by ties they must obey, and I shall simply go and round them up."

"It will take some weeks."

"Yes, and I can do a little work as a spy, meanwhile, and you can do the same."

"I am a hard man to disguise, I fear."

"Oh, I can rig you up all right."

"Well, go ahead."

"Play parson, for instance, and then any other character that may suit you."

"I believe, as we are not unlike, except in years, I could imitate you."

"Would you do it?"

"Why not?"

"Well, with you it would be playing a part only, while with me it would be the bitter reality of deformity," was the low and earnest response of the hunchback.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PLOTTING MISCHIEF.

AFTER a few weeks' stay at the cabin of the hermit, the renegade decided that it would be well to begin work.

The two had planned to get so many men, and that they would have them go in the disguise of red-skins, so there would be no chance of recognition whatever when seen as white men.

They would send them to a certain rendezvous, to await their coming, and then would run down the line of ranches, spying out what information they could, and changing the disguise of the renegade as frequently as he deemed necessary.

It was in this way that Devil Dick started out as a spy, and every couple of days he would meet the old hermit by appointment at some selected rendezvous and talk over matters.

The hermit's work was to get the men he knew of, as being competent villains for the work in hand, and also to spy out all he could as to the different ranches where he stopped possessing anything of value or not.

The disguise which Devil Dick assumed, impersonating the hunchback, was remarkable in its clever imitation.

He hed the stoop in his gait, the hump, and with his well-fitting false beard and wig of gray, his spectacles and worn clothes and slouch hat, as the two men were about the same size, it was hard to tell the original from the representation.

Devil Dick had stopped at several places and played his part so well, that he felt emboldened to visit Soldier's Retreat Ranch, the home of Captain Hassan.

He made it his business, however, to arrive after nightfall, and was cordially welcomed at the hospitable home.

He told the same story of his being an old man in search of his son, and Captain Hassan went to all the cowboys to learn if he could hear of such a man as the visitor wished to find.

Saying that he must be off before dawn, he found breakfast ready for him, and a supply of food given him for his journey.

He dared not risk in daylight the scrutiny of the eyes of Mrs. Hassan who had known him as the slayer of her brother and the destroyer of her home, and he quailed under the beautiful, honest eyes of little Belle, whom he had so long held as a captive in the Indian village.

If recognized he knew what his fate would be, and so he gave a deep sigh of relief as he rode away in the early morn from the house where he had been so kindly treated.

So he went on his way until at last he again dared to venture before the eyes of the woman whom he had so wronged.

She had treated him well, as has been seen, with more than kindness; but he had felt uneasy under the gaze she had kept upon him, and glad he was to get away from there too.

The more he pondered over the searching look of Ruth, the more he decided that he had risked a terrible danger, and he hastened on to his rendezvous with the hermit.

He saw him coming across the prairie and as their trails crossed they halted.

Then he told the hermit of his fears, that he feared Ruth Redmond might recall him and send in pursuit.

"If she does, I am a lost man, so you must help me out," he said.

"How can I?"

"You mount my horse and go on as they directed me, while I take your horse and ride on to Mustang Center."

"I will stop there to-night and wait for you to join me, for if they do not overhaul you by sunset, then there will be no danger of pursuit and you can come on after me."

"If they do?"

"They'll discover that you are the *real* not the made-up man, and all will be well."

"I see, and I'll do it."

"Let us get from one horse to the other without dismounting and leaving tracks," said the cunning old man.

This was done and they parted.

The reader has seen the result of the pursuit of Ruth and her cowboys, and of Carl and Merton following the man that had gone to Mustang Center which was a small settlement where half a dozen trails met, consisting of a tavern, blacksmith shop, several stores, and half a dozen saloons and gambling dens, with a score or more of ranches surrounding.

There was a fine group of springs there, plenty of timber, and it had been a great haunt of wild horses, hence its name of Mustang Center.

When Ruth and her cowboys left the hermit to go on his way, he continued on to the timber, staked his horse out and built a fire.

"They will see the fire and know I have gone into camp."

"A big head has Devil Dick, and if he had not conceived the plan to change horses with me he would have gotten it into a lariat noose sure."

"Well, it was a narrow call, for that young girl meant business."

"She is the one he said he intended to kidnap and force to yield up a fortune lately left her."

"I hope he may get it."

"Now to have supper and then for a night ride to Mustang Center, and my advice to Devil Dick will be, as I will find the last man I am looking for at Mustang Center, to light out for safer quarters, for if suspected we will get into trouble when unprepared for it."

Two hours after the hermit was on his way to Mustang Center.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AT MUSTANG CENTER.

THE "Grand Hotel" at Mustang Center was exactly the opposite of its name.

It was little more than a board shanty, and "dormitories" were the style in which guests were roomed, with one or two exceptions, for there were half a dozen "special rooms" in one wing for which three times the regular rate was charged.

"Parson" Peter Pry, as Devil Dick in his ecclesiastical disguise had written himself down, was assigned to one of these special rooms, for the landlord had a streak of piety in his nature, and had an eye to saving his soul by kindness to what he was pleased to call a "Gospil Peddler."

He had said to his wife:

"I say, Sarah, that's a Gospil Peddler here, and I've give him ther Bridal Chamber, and won't charge him nothin', so jist git our kid ready in the morning and we'll have him baptized."

"Ah, Caleb, how nice that will be."

"I'll put on his little cowpuncher suit, with the little revolvers the gambler gave him."

"Ther boy don't wish ter shoot his way inter heaven, Sarah; but do as yer likes, and remember his name are ter be Jim Dandy Sykes."

"Yes, Caleb," and the wife was happy, and set about getting up some extra dishes for the "Parson."

The pretended parson enjoyed his supper and had a talk with Mrs. Sykes afterward, also having the honor of meeting "Jim Dandy, the Boy Baby Cowpuncher," a youth of six summers, who lariated the distinguished guest most skillfully across the room, very nearly choking him, causing him to feel that it was a forerunner of what might be his fate.

He also gave vent to a few words, which falling from the lips of a parson, Mrs. Sykes in the goodness of her soul mistook for prayer.

But Jim Dandy, better educated in such words, escaped from the room and told his father that he "had roped the Gospil Sharp and made him cuss great big words."

Then he added:

"I was jiss chokin' de stuffin' out o' him, dad, when mam corralled me."

Parson Peter Pry had promised Mrs. Sykes to "round up" Jim Dandy in the morning and baptize him, and then retired to his room, known as the "Bridal Chamber," as it was kept for newly wedded unfortunates who drifted that way.

It was a room twelve feet square, with one door, one window, a bed with a corn shuck mattress, a straw pillow, unbleached sheeting and cases, or "grandmother's quilt," and a Mexican serape for covering.

There was a shelf with a tin basin and pitcher, for a washstand, a towel on a roller, two chairs and a glass over a shelf on the wall.

When he saw the bed the parson did utter a fervent prayer:

"Heaven help those in the Grand Hotel who do not occupy the bridal chamber!"

Then he sat down with a tallow candle upon the shelf, and looked over some papers upon which were pencil-notes.

He was thus engaged when the door opened without any premonitory knock, and Landlord Sykes said:

"Parson, thar's a hump-backed pilgrim out here as says he wants ter see you."

"Show him in, Brother Sykes," was Parson Pry's response in graveyard tones.

And a moment after in walked the hermit.

The parson greeted him pleasantly, and the latter said in a whisper:

"Who's next door?"

"The room stands apart."

"Good! we've got to dust."

"When?"

"By daylight."

"So soon?"

"Yes."

"What's up?"

"She was onto you."

"Who?"

"The Sunset Ranch girl."

"Ah!"

"She followed me and I played you."

"She had a pack of cowboys with her, and one by the name Bible Bill nearly pulled my beard and hair off to see if it was false."

"Had it been you, your toes would now be turned up to the prairie flowers."

"You are right; but then?"

"They went back, I went into camp for a couple of hours and then came here."

"Saw your racket of parson on the books, so waked you up, and as soon as I catch my man we will be off."

"You think it best?"

"I know it is!"

"Why?"

"Well, I lighted my lantern and saw, when I reached your trail, that two men bad branched off from the cowboys following me, and were after you."

"Have you seen them?"

"By Jove, yes!"

"Here?"

"I saw one whom I had a row with once, and another fellow came up and had a talk with me."

"I've got to baptize the landlord's kid in the morning, but—"

"Darn the kid!"

"If you don't get out, you'll need the services of a real parson to bury you."

"Well, I am ready; but have you seen your man?"

"I have."

"That completes the number?"

"It does."

"Then we had better go before dawn."

"I'll play the racket that I want you to go and bury my wife, and you can promise to return in a couple of days—see?"

"Yes, that will be it."

"Let us go to the landlord now."

They did so, and the landlord wished to wake Jim Dandy up then and baptize him, but Mrs. Sykes said the kid would be fighting mad and stampede the gang if wakened up, so the parson told her he would return in a couple of days, and the two villains departed.

Twenty-four hours after their departure Ruth Redmond and her cowboys rode into Mustang Center.

But the game was gone, and their trail could not be found, so back to Sunset Ranch rode the disappointed woman, though she said firmly:

"I will find him yet!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE RED RIDERS OF THE RIO.

THERE was excitement along the line of frontier ranches, and men looked at each other with suspicion, while women and children dreaded for night to come.

The reason was, that one night the ranch of a wealthy cattleman had been raided.

There had been a stampede of his cattle the day before, calling his cowboys away in chase, and then, a couple of hours after dark, a dozen horsemen had ridden into the yard and surrounded the house.

The ranchero had been forced to submit, at the muzzle of a revolver, and then his home had been robbed of all that was valuable.

Silver-plate, brought from the far-away home in Virginia from which the settlers had come, jewelry belonging to the ladies and all that was of value, which could be readily carried off, was taken.

Horses belonging to the ranch, the best ones, were used to carry the packs, and the other animals were cruelly hamstrung, by a slash of the knife, to prevent pursuit.

Then the raiders rode away in the darkness, leaving their victims bound.

When the cowboys returned with the stampeded cattle they discussed the situation.

"Who were they?" was the question upon every lip.

"They were red-skins, or white men disguised as such."

"I believe the latter," was the reply.

Pursuit was at once made and the raiders were tracked to the Rio Grande.

A week passed and again came the news that another ranch had been raided, after a false alarm had called the cowboys away from the place, and once more the horses had been crippled to prevent pursuit.

A large supply of plunder had been taken and again the raiders had escaped across the Rio Grande beyond pursuit.

Then men began to talk of the mysterious foes as the "Red Riders of the Rio," and yet it was pretty certain that they were not redskins.

A couple of more weeks passed, and a third ranch was raided, and this time a young child, the only one of his parents, who were rich, had been kidnapped.

The horses had been crippled, the ranch caught with its defenders away from home, and the Red Riders had gotten away beyond all pursuit with a very large quantity of booty.

Then men began to arm and prepare for those midnight attacks, and every ranch home became like a fortified camp.

But weeks went by, men became indifferent, and one of the ranchmen dismissed his cowboys to their camps, saying he believed that the Red Riders would not dare to appear again.

Two nights after he had cause to repent his haste, for his house was surrounded, and resisting, he was shot down mercilessly, while all that he had of value in his house was taken, his fine herd of horses were crippled, and when dawn came the Red Riders had disappeared.

They were tracked to the Rio Grande, but the pursuers dared not follow across the river, and so the chase ended.

But the ranchmen were armed again to resistance, and many were becoming desperate at the thought of what they might expect.

Captain Hassan had a large force of cowboys, and two-thirds of these went into camp each night around his home, while the remainder patrolled the prairies in the neighborhood and guarded the cattle and horses.

Ruth Redmond also increased her force of cowboys to a score, and these were quartered on the broad piazzas at night, while half a dozen scouts were kept moving about, each carrying a bundle of rockets with them, to send up from wherever they might be at the approach of danger.

Other ranches were also well guarded; but now and then a weak one was found and that was at once made the objective point of the Red Riders.

Thus had ten ranches been raided in half a year, and as the Red Riders always knew where to strike and when, it was certain that they had spies in the settlements to post them.

But who were these spies?

Who could be placed under suspicion, where all seemed honest fellows?

Then followed ranch Number Eleven, as they began to be called, when raided.

From here too, a captive had been taken to hold for ransom, and a note had been left by the leader, saying that if the parents of the captives wished to treat for ransom, that a message could be left at a certain solitary tree upon the Texan shore of the Rio Grande, saying if terms demanded would be accepted.

If accepted, then the parties interested could send a messenger to the tree on a given day bearing the money, and the captives would be brought there by a messenger of the Red Riders and given up.

The rich ranchero, whose only child was a prisoner, was so anxious to get back his little boy, that he at once answered that he would accept the terms and treat accordingly.

The parents of the other captive, a young girl, agreed to do likewise, and the letter was deposited in the solitary tree, while men from a distant point of observation waited to watch the result.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE RANSOM.

THE messenger from the ranchmen went to the rendezvous at the solitary tree alone.

He carried with him in leather bags, the sum demanded by the Red Riders, and he rode along with eyes watchful for the result.

It was Bible Bill who had volunteered for the work, and those who knew him were well aware that notwithstanding his praying and preaching he would fight any man alive at the drop of a hat if occasion required.

The prairie stretched away for miles from the river, with not a single hiding-place in view, and as he rode toward the tree, Bible Bill saw three riders coming down the bank toward him.

One was mounted upon a blood bay horse, and he was in the garb of an Indian, his face being in full war-paint.

On either side of him came the two captives, a young girl and the little boy.

Bible Bill halted at the tree and waited for them to arrive, while he eyed the Red Rider searchingly and curiously.

He saw that the man was splendidly mounted, armed with repeating rifle and revolvers, and looked like one to use them.

But Bible Bill was also well armed, and he muttered:

"That is no Indian."

"Well, I am here with my gold, pard," he called out, while he nodded pleasantly to the two children.

"Me got pale-face papoose."

"Bah! talk straight American, man, for you are no more Indian than I am."

"You can't fool me, so come to business."

"Very well; have you got the money?"

"I have."

"How much?"

"Ten thousand."

"What?"

"Dollars."

"Ten thousand for each."

"No, you cut-throat, and if you attempt to play any such game on me now, I'll fight it out with you right here."

"I have no fear of you."

"Then say you won't take the ransom you demanded, and begin the fight."

"I act for another, so will take the money."

"You are wise; but any time you care to act for yourself, just meet me here and I'll give you a duel at close range."

"Count out your money."

"There is one bag, and it contains five thousand dollars."

"I will count it."

"All right."

The Red Rider dismounted quietly, spread his serape upon the ground and poured the gold upon it.

Then he sat down and began to count it.

He counted rapidly, and at last said:

"This is right."

"Hand me the other."

Bible Bill tossed it to him in a way that made him spring aside to prevent being struck a severe blow.

He poured the gold out as he had the other, and counted this, too.

"Correct."

"Now, little pards, you come with me," said Bible Bill.

"They will have to walk, for these horses do not belong to them."

"You lie, for you stole them, and they don't walk."

"Come, Red Rider, I've kept my contract, and nothing was said about after it, so either those children go mounted with me, or you and I come to a draw."

"Which shall it be?" and Bible Bill dropped his hand upon his revolver.

"I have orders to get into no trouble with the messenger."

"You are wise to obey."

"Come, children, come with me now."

Both the girl and boy seemed afraid to obey, and, as the Red Rider made no sign for them to do so, Bible Bill rode forward, threw the bridle-rein of each of their horses from off the horn of the outlaw's saddle, and said:

"Now go."

They obeyed, and Bible Bill told them to ride on down the bank.

They obeyed, and he remained.

He was spoiling for a fight, and showed it.

But the Red Rider said:

"You have gotten what you came for, so go; for if you give trouble there will be no more ransoming of captives."

"You have to catch them first."

"We can do that."

"Come, if there is trouble you will be the cause, and the innocent will suffer."

"All right, I'll go; but could we make an arrangement to meet again and have this out?"

"I have no quarrel with you."

"But I have with you."

"Then have it out when we strike the Sunset Ranch, Bible Bill," was the cool response of the Red Rider, and having tied the bags of gold to his saddle he leaped lightly upon his horse and rode away.

CHAPTER XXX.

ANOTHER BLOW.

WHEN Bible Bill overtook the two children they at once told him how they had overheard the chief tell the man who came with them to get the money if he could, and bring them back too, to be held for ten thousand dollars more ransom.

"Only your bravery saved us, sir, for you frightened that man," said the young girl.

"Yes, you did, and I thought you were going to shoot him, and he was awful scared," the boy added.

"I only wish he had given me the chance," muttered Bible Bill.

When they had gotten back to the timber they were met by the fathers of the two children, and Bible Bill was made a hero of at once, as soon as all that had passed had been told by the girl and boy.

"Had a less courageous man than you gone, Bible Bill, we would never have seen our children," said one of the rancheros.

Then the children told how they had been blindfolded and their hands tied behind them, when they were carried off.

They had not been allowed to see until they were taken to a cabin in the mountains, and there they were kept constantly under guard of an old hunchback, they said.

When taken away from the cabin they had been blindfolded again, and while there they had only seen the old hunchback.

Ruth Redmond had gone to the scene with her cowboys, and taking the children apart she had had each one tell the story of their capture and imprisonment.

She had asked many questions, and when at last she started home she said to Bible Bill:

"Those are not Indians."

"The one I met was not."

"None of them are."

"How do you know, Captain Ruth?"

"Well, I got a great deal of information from those children."

"Yes."

"They were taken to a cabin in the mountains."

"So they said."

"They were guarded by an old hunchback, with long gray beard and hair."

"Ah! the man we saw?"

"Of course, and the comrade of Dick Drummond."

"So it seems."

"Now those children did not cross any big stream going to the cabin of the hunchback."

"Indeed?"

"They said they were blindfolded, and remembered crossing streams, but no very large one."

"By Jove, Captain Ruth, you ferret out well," said Bible Bill admiringly.

"Then they did not cross the Rio Grande."

"Yet we tracked the Red Raiders to the Rio."

"True, and they may have ridden in, gone a short distance above and come out."

"True."

"Or the band might have crossed and the children, who were captured at different times, taken by one man to the retreat."

"That is so, miss."

"Now I gleaned from the two the same story, and I am convinced that the band does not number over a dozen men, and that they have their retreat on Texas soil."

"They may cross the river, go up to another ford and recross; but they have their den on this side and we must find them."

"I am more than ready to make the attempt, Captain Ruth."

And back to Sunset Ranch went Ruth and her cowboys to meet a surprise.

The night they were absent the Red Riders had been there.

They had not found her horses, so they had escaped being crippled, as the cowboys that had been left behind had driven them to a hiding-place for the night.

Two of her men had been killed, as they resisted, and her home had been plundered of a number of little valuables, while Primus and Nannie had been scared almost to death.

"Oh Lordy! but wasn't ther cap'n mad when he found you wasn't home, missy," said Primus.

"He did cuss that hard as I never b'lieved a red Injun know'd how, and swor'd he'd git even yet," Nannie remarked.

Ruth heard all and then asked quietly:

"How many were there?"

"The cap'n, missy, and jist ten."

"See, Bible Bill, and the hunchback went

with the children and gave them over to the messenger, and they would make up the dozen," said Ruth.

"I guess you are right, miss."

"Well, they came here after me, I am sure; but they would have found us ready for them had we been at home."

"They certainly would, and I wish they would only call again."

"I saw that scamp smile when I told him we would have nothing more to dread from the Red Riders, for he knew then that they were raiding the ranch, but expected you were here."

"I will tell you why I know they came after me, Bible Bill," and the impressive manner in which Ruth spoke caused the cowboy chief to feel that she had something of more than ordinary interest to tell him.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BIBLE BILL WINS.

"LET me tell you, Bible Bill, what I have kept a secret, as I did not care to have any one know it, nor did I desire the money."

"You know," continued Ruth, "that my father left me this ranch, with a number of cattle upon it."

"Yes."

"You also know that he had an interest in a gold mine, which an honest man turned over to me, and I then became possessed of a large fortune."

"As I wedded Devil Dick, who fascinated me, simply through my admiration of manliness and courage, for I could not see his evil heart, I turned over to him my entire fortune."

"The result was that he squandered it, and then discovered that I had come in possession of another fortune, a secret I had kept from him."

"My father had an uncle who was a sailor and settled in the West Indies, where he made an enormous fortune."

"He married there a very rich woman, who died soon after, leaving no children, and bequeathed to him all of her riches."

"Some years ago this uncle died and he left to his nearest heirs all of his vast wealth."

"These heirs were my Uncle Redmond and myself, for we have no more kindred."

"As Uncle Redmond died, and his wife soon followed him, that left me the sole possessor of the large estate, which is in the care of competent executors in New Orleans."

"The letter telling me that I was an heir, along with my uncle, Dick Drummond found."

"He knew that I would never claim it, if I had to give it up to him, and so he sought to kill me that he might claim my fortune."

"He very nearly was successful, but I lived, returned to my uncle and aunt, and you know what followed."

"Now that Devil Dick knows I am alone the heir of all, he is determined to get me in his power to force me to give him gold, and I tell you that I feel, I know, that Richard Drummond is the leader of the Red Raiders."

"I believe you are right, Captain Ruth," earnestly said Bible Bill.

"I know that I am."

"It is just like him."

"Yes, and he is as brave as he is cunning."

"He will do anything."

"See how well he has planned these raids."

"He has, indeed."

"His men are disguised as Indians, and he has a small force of picked villains that he can handle."

"He and the hunchback visited the ranches, and made their pick of the ones to raid."

"He has a den in Texas, but retreats across the river to give an idea that they are Mexican raiders."

"But Dick Drummond is outlawed in Mexico even by outlaws, and he would not dare remain there over night, so I am sure he recrosses at the nearest ford and goes to his retreat, over which the hunchback holds sway."

"They are splendidly mounted, well armed, pick the best horses for carrying off their plunder, and cripple the others."

"Yes, and that is as cruel as to kill."

"It is worse, to cripple a poor, dumb beast; but it is just like the nature of Richard Drummond to do so."

"He has no heart, knows no mercy, and delights to torture and to kill a human being or brute."

"He was in his element as renegade chief of the Comanches, for he could teach them cruelties they would shudder at, savages though they are."

"Now let me tell you more how he has hurt

me, and you will know whether I long to hunt him down or not," and she told the sad story of his marriage to Ella Glenn, and then of his weding her while his first wife yet lived, and of all his cruel treatment to those who had loved him.

"Now, Bible Bill, I have told you all."

"Long ago, when you believed that I was a poor girl, living upon the charity of my uncle and aunt, you told me of your love for me, and asked me to be your wife."

"When I told you I could not marry you, never have you again spoken to me on the subject."

"But I have read your heart and eyes but too well, and I was determined that you should know all of my bitter life."

"I have told you, and it tells you that I cannot give you a heart upon which a stain has fallen."

"You are wrong, Captain Ruth, for you are as pure as a lily, you are a true woman, true as steel to yourself, and I would now ask you again to be my wife, only you are so rich I would not dare do so."

"Knowing all, you ask me to marry you, William Darling?"

"I do."

"Well, let me tell you that your love and devotion have won my admiration, my gratitude, yes, my affection, and when Richard Drummond has been punished by death for his crimes, I will be your wife."

"But see, there comes a body of horsemen across the prairie," and Ruth pointed to where a party of mounted men just came in sight.

Instantly Bible Bill seized the bugle hanging to his belt and blew wild notes of alarm to rally his men, for the horsemen coming might be the Red Raiders, returning to complete their villainous work by the kidnapping of Ruth Redmond.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE VOLUNTEER FERRETS.

THE cowboys of Sunset Ranch rallied quickly to the bugle-call of their chief, and as the horsemen drew near they were ready to meet them in battle.

But suddenly Ruth, who had her glass upon them, called out:

"It is Buck Taylor and his boys."

A cheer greeted this, and off dashed Bible Bill and his cowboys to meet and greet them.

Watching them, Ruth saw the tall form of Buck Taylor in the lead, and behind him came a group of men riding close together, and who she saw were prisoners, and Indians, or such they appeared to be.

Behind these came a large number of horses laden with heavy packs, and a score of mounted men, Buck Taylor's Boys, brought up the rear.

The cowboys from Sunset Ranch circled around them with wild yells of joy, and seemed almost frantic as they came on toward the house.

Riding up to the steps Buck Taylor dismounted, and raising his sombrero said pleasantly:

"Captain Ruth, I have brought you the Red Riders of the Rio Grande as prisoners."

Ruth Redmond turned deadly pale and faltered forth:

"And their leader, Devil Dick?"

"Ah! you knew he was their chief?"

"Yes."

"He is dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"I hanged him and saw him buried, Captain Ruth."

"When?"

"At sunrise this morning."

"You are sure it was Devil Dick?" eagerly said Ruth Redmond.

"Do you know this ring?" and Buck Taylor handed over a large seal ring.

"Yes, it was his."

"Here is his watch also, and in this pack are a number of his traps, some papers and his weapons."

"And you hanged him?"

"Yes, Captain Ruth, and all the band were taken except one, an old gray-haired hermit."

"He escaped, but Devil Dick and his band of twelve men are accounted for, as we shot six in our fight with them, and there are six more who are to hang, for I shall deliver them over to the Vigilantes; but these men will tell you that there was no doubt of the hanging of their chief."

"And that was Devil Dick?"

"Yes, for they knew him well."

"You see, I got all the stolen plunder too,

and I have here what was taken from your house, and shall return the other booty to the different ranches as I go along, and at each one robbed I shall give up a prisoner to the Vigilantes to hang, and only regret that there are not enough to go round, for your house was Number Thirteen that they had struck."

"Yes; but how is it that you were on the trail of the Red Riders?"

"You see, Bible Bill sent me word of their doings, and their plan of action, telling me to be on the lookout.

"I at once ambushed my men, now five weeks ago, and had scouts watching their little game.

"We struck it after this raid on your house, trailed them across the Rio Grande, then back again to Texas soil, and then to their den at the hunchback's cabin.

"We went right in on their heels, surprised them and settled it right there in the valley in front of the cabin.

"The hunchback got away, but the others are all present or accounted for, Captain Ruth," and Buck Taylor gave a military salute, which Ruth promptly returned.

As Buck Taylor was anxious to return to his duties, he only halted long enough to have dinner for himself and men, and then set off to give back the stolen booty to the other ranches, marking as he rode away:

"We hanged Devil Dick for you, Captain Ruth, so will leave no frightful example hanging at your house."

Hardly had they gone when Ruth said:

"Bible Bill."

"Yes, Captain Ruth."

"I wish you and six men to go with me at once for a long ride."

Half an hour after they rode away from the ranch, Ruth Redmond leading.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CONCLUSION.

THE ride which Ruth intended to take Bible Bill guessed at, and when she told him to follow the trail of Buck Taylor's boys he knew that he was right.

They did not follow their trail going from Sunset Ranch, but the one they had come there by.

Ruth led the pace at a gallop, and held it until nightfall, when they camped at the Rio Grande.

At the very first appearance of daybreak they were again in the saddle and upon the trail.

They crossed the river, turned sharply to the right on the other shore, followed the trail along the bank for some miles, and then recrossed to Texas soil.

Rapidly they pushed on then, and after a few hours' ride found themselves in the mountains.

Entering a small valley they beheld a spur before them, and upon it the still smoldering remains of a fire.

It was the burned cabin of the hunchback. But that old villain was nowhere to be seen. He had wisely departed for other scenes.

But there were some newly-made graves in the valley, where rested the Red Riders killed in the fight, and apart were two others, the last resting-place of two of Buck Taylor's Boys who had fallen.

"That is his grave, I know."

"Open it," said Ruth, pointing to one grave near the cabin.

The cowboys set to work, and after awhile came to a form enveloped in a blanket.

The rope was cut, the blanket unfolded, and the face and form revealed.

"It is Richard Drummond."

"There is no mistake, and I am at last avenged."

She spoke aloud, but seemed unconscious that any one heard her.

Then she turned away while the cowboys refilled the grave.

Mounting their horses they set off by the nearest trail homeward, Bible Bill guiding.

Upon returning to Sunset Ranch they heard the story of how Buck Taylor had returned the plunder to its owners, and that the Vigilantes had made short work of the Red Riders.

"Now, William Darling, I will keep my pledge to you six months from to-day," said Ruth, placing her hand in that of the cowboy chief.

And she kept her word, for she married the handsome cowboy, and Bessie Harris, with another cowboy lover, stood up with the happy couple at the wedding.

And also there was Buck Taylor and his cowboy band, and the young ranger had the

honor of giving the bride away, and escorting the newly married couple to the nearest railway station, for after all of her terrible experience in the Lone Star State, and possessed of a vast fortune, Ruth Darling decided to seek a home elsewhere, and over which hung no bitter memories, no shadows to mar the life into which the sun now shone.

THE END.

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- 474 Flora; or, Wizard Will's Vagabond Pard.
- 483 Ferrets Afloat; or, Wizard Will's Last Case.
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- 495 Arizona Joe the Boy Pard of Texas Jack.
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- 511 The Outlawed Middy.
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- 525 Brothers in Buckskin.
- 530 The Buckskin Bowers.
- 535 The Buckskin Rovers.
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- 550 Lafitte's Legacy; or, The Avenging Son.
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- 560 Pawnee Bill, the Prairie Shadower.
- 565 Kent Kingdom, the Card King.
- 570 Camille, the Card Queen.
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- 586 The Buckskin Avenger.
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- 597 The Young Texan Detective.
- 602 The Vagabond of the Mines.
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- 644 The Hercules Highwayman.
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- 656 Butterfly Billy's Man Hunt.
- 662 Butterfly Billy's Bonanza.
- 668 The Buccaneer Midshipman.
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- 702 Blue Jacket Bill; or, The Red Hat Rangers' Red Hot Racket.
- 707 The Red Sombrero Rangers; or, Redfern's Last Trail.
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- 158 Fancy Frank of Colorado; or, The Trapper's Trust.

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